

Series: Basic Gospel of Mark

Title: Jesus and The Twelve

Text: Mark 1:16-20; 3:13-19; 6:7-13; 8:34

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The term “disciple” is a popular one within Christianity. It is used of followers of Christ. One could apply it to any born-again believer. However, there is a sense in which the term can only be applied to a select group of Christians. When one reads the New Testament, one discovers there were twelve men who served as official disciples during Jesus’ ministry. The title “apostle” is also applied to the group of men. While all only the Twelve can be regarded as disciples in official sense, all Christians can be regarded as disciples in an unofficial sense. From studying the book of Mark, we discover four important concepts related to Jesus’ disciples. The four concepts teach us much about how the Lord works in the lives of His followers.

THE FIRST DISCIPLES (READ MARK 1:16-20)

Mark 1:16-20 tells of the way Jesus called His first disciples unto Himself. The passage followed Mark’s description of Jesus’ preaching — “Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mark 1:14-15). Soon after initiating His public ministry, the Lord selected disciples. Such was a common activity in first-century Israel. Rabbis normally had apprentices and devotees who both learned from them and joined them in ministry endeavors. Jesus’ selection of His disciples was different however. His purpose was to ordain twelve men who would serve as the foundation for His church (Matthew 16:18; Revelation 21:14).

Not Many Wise

Several features of Jesus’ selection process are of interest to us. First, it is interesting to note the type of men our Lord selected. Mark said, “they were fishermen.” For many modern Christians, such a detail might not seem significant. Many have heard that some of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen. Consequently, they overlook the significance of Mark’s words. It is important to consider that fisherman normally didn’t follow rabbis in the first-century world. Such an occupation wasn’t regarded as fertile ground for finding the next religious leaders for the nation.

It is unlikely that the first of Jesus’ disciples — “Simon and Andrew...James the son of Zebedee and his brother John” — were given to astute religious learning. Sure, they had likely heard much teaching from the Law in the synagogue during their lifetime (Mark 1:21-29). They were well-versed in Messianic expectations of the nation. Such is evidenced by some of Peter’s actions in Mark’s gospel (Mark 8:29; 9:5; 14:47). Despite such things, the original disciples wouldn’t have been regarded as the most promising prospects for a first-century rabbi.

It is unlikely that the first four disciples were proficient in the latest perspectives on the Torah. They probably didn’t know much about the Mishnah, the popular volume that contained rabbinical tradition and interpretations of the Law. Usually, one was required to pass a rigorous test before being commissioned as a follower of a rabbi.

From the world's perspective, Peter and Andrew wouldn't have qualified for such things.¹

Despite the world's way of measuring things, Jesus enlisted unlikely candidates for His school of training. Our Lord's method revealed that the ways of the Lord are often different from the ways of the world. In addition, our Lord's method demonstrated that Christ's kingdom isn't building on the wisdom of men. The church is built on the power of Jesus, not the ingenuity or skill of mere humanity. Scripture says, "Brothers and sisters, consider your calling: Not many were wise from a human perspective, not many powerful, not many of noble birth. Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:26-27).

Forsaking All

Another unique feature of Jesus' calling of Peter, Andrew, James, and John centers on the men's willingness to forsake so much in order to follow Jesus. The four were willing to leave behind both familial and financial profit for the mission of Christ. In regard to the first matter, Mark 1:20 says, James and John "... left their father Zebedee in the boat...." Leaving the oversight of one's father was a big deal for first-century Jews, considering the paramount importance the Ten Commandments placed on honoring parents (Exodus 20:12). Jesus did not require James and John to abandon their father in a way that would transgress God's Law; however, he did call them to give primary allegiance to the Kingdom of God. Our Lord would give teaching on this matter at a later point in His earthly ministry (Luke 14:26).

On top of forsaking family, the first disciples also denied earthly financial pursuits. Details in Mark's gospel reveal that Peter, Andrew, James, and John work in what seems to have been a lucrative enterprise. The reference to "nets" in verses 16, 18, and 19 indicated that the men owned commercial fishing nets that measured 20 to 26 feet in diameter. Such nets were well-crafted and contained weights that made them sink into the sea.² Jesus' first disciples weren't part-time fishermen. They weren't hacks; they were professionals.

Fishing was a profitable trade in the first-century world, as most people in the Hellenized world ate it as their primary meat. Fish were exported from the Holy Land to Egypt and Syria.³ Peter, Andrew, James, and John most likely made a good living off of their work. In verse 20, Mark spoke of "hired men" who worked with James and John in the family business. The fact that the men had employees working for them shows that the family was relatively prosperous.⁴ One has said it "indicates that the brothers were by no means poor."⁵ Of interest for us is the fact that James and John

¹ Edwards, 60.

² Schnabel, 53.

³ Edwards, 49.

⁴ Schnabel, 55.

⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 68.

were willing to forsake their source of financial stability for the sake of Christ. Peter and Andrew were as well (Mark 1:18).

Recently, a popular TV show was released that depicted the life of Jesus and His disciples. Interestingly, the program portrayed Jesus' first disciples as being poor fishermen. Peter was presented as a debt-laden schemer who had to finagle his way out of demands from unrelenting bill collectors. His family had to fight to find their next meal. Under the pressure of such things, Peter and his wife experienced great marital strain.

Mark's gospel presents a different picture of the original disciples. The men didn't have a perfect life, but they did have a solid means of making a living. They also had tight family connections. However, they were willing to put Christ above such things. They stand as a memorial of what's involved in true discipleship. Each generation of believers is called to make the things of the world secondary, so that Christ might be primary. Sinclair Ferguson has said, "In principle the challenge is exactly the same for us. It may not necessarily involve such a dramatic change in our everyday occupations (although that is by no means infrequent); but Christ's call and his kingly reign over our lives does mean that from then on they are no longer at our own disposal."⁶

This is the call of Christ. This is what it means to be a disciple — we forsake all to follow of Jesus. We go where He goes, and we do what He would have us do. True disciples are willing to forsake the prosperity and perks of modern society for the joy of serving Jesus. Homes, cars, friendships, money, security, and accolades from mere mortals are all of little importance when compared to the joy of knowing Jesus. Rejection from men and scorn from society is humbly accepted as requisite wages for the pleasure of glorifying God. Though the precise circumstances may be different, true followers of Christ have a testimony similar to the one Moses had — "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter and chose to suffer with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasure of sin. For he considered reproach for the sake of Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, since he was looking ahead to the reward" (Hebrews 11:24-26).

Proclaim the Gospel

Jesus' call to His first disciples involved an interesting summons. Our Lord told Peter and Andrew, "I will make you fish for people" (Mark 1:17). Modern minds often tie Jesus' metaphor to contemporary conceptions of fishing. It is important to note that imagery related to fishing had a peculiar meaning for first-century Jews. Most were familiar with the way Jeremiah used the activity as a sign for judgment. In Jeremiah 16:16, we read, "I am about to send for many fishermen — this is the Lord's declaration — 'and they will fish for them. Then I will send for many hunters, and they will hunt them down on every mountain and hill and out of the clefts of the rocks.'"

In calling disciples to Himself, Jesus selected specially-chosen agents to go into the nation of Israel and proclaim a message of judgment. In proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, Peter and Andrew would make people aware of judgment that would soon fall on the nation (Mark 13:1-2, 6:11; Romans 11:25). Jerusalem would be

⁶ Ferguson, 11.

ransacked in 70 AD at the hands of Titus. The temple would be destroyed and Jewish sacrifices would be brought to an end. The metaphor of fishing “for people” referred to such things.

In addition, the fishing metaphor revealed the way Jesus’ life brought hope of salvation to Gentiles (Mark 16:15), people who were typically regarded as destined for a godless existence. Just as the judgment of Jeremiah’s day brought pain to the Jews at the profit of Gentile nations (Jeremiah 16:26-21), the first-century Jews rejection of Jesus would bring about judgment on the nation, while ushering in what we now know as “the time of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24; Romans 11:25). The incident involving the disciples speaking in unknown tongues on the Day of Pentecost served as a signpost concerning such things as well (Acts 2:1-21).

It is in this way that modern conceptions of fishing can be applied to Jesus’ metaphor. The preaching of the first disciples would declare judgment on the Jews, but it would open the door to deliverance from judgment for Gentiles. It is for this reason that Mark’s gospel would end with the Great Commission — “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15-16).

Modern disciples stand in the lineage of the first disciples. Each of God’s children has been called to herald the gospel so that people might be delivered from coming judgment. J.C. Ryle has said, “The meaning of this expression is clear and unmistakable. The disciples were to become fishers for souls. They were to labour to draw men out of darkness into light, and from the power of Satan to God. They were to strive to bring men into the net of Christ’s church, that so they might be saved alive, and not perish everlastingly.”⁷ Are you being used by God to rescue others from the judgment that is to come (Acts 24:25)?

THE TWELVE APOSTLES (READ MARK 3:13-19)

Mark 3:13-19 contains a more detailed account of Jesus’ selection of His disciples. In particular, it tells of the way He appointed the entire group of twelve. It lists out the name of each disciple, saying:

He appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, to send them out to preach, and to have authority to drive out demons. He appointed the Twelve: To Simon, he gave the name Peter; and to James the son of Zebedee, and to his brother John, he gave the name “Boanerges” (that is, “Sons of Thunder”); Andrew; Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed him (Mark 3:14-18).

The number “Twelve” was significant. It was equal to the number of the tribes of Israel. Revelation 4:4 seems to indicate that the Lord sovereignly chose to have two groups of twelve — twelve tribes in the Old Testament and twelve disciples in the New Testament — in order to depict His complete and full dealing with mankind in His plan of

⁷ Ryle, 8.

redemption, via two eternal covenants. From looking at Jesus' selection of the Twelve of Mark 3:14-18, we see a few important truths about Christian discipleship.

Intimacy with God

First, Jesus calling of His first disciples reveals that discipleship involves intimacy with God. In Mark 3:14, we read, "He appointed twelve...*to be with him*." One has said that the word translated "be with" have an aura of fellowship.⁸ Such fellowship is a defining mark of a Christ follower.

Disciples spend time with Jesus. They read His Word, they fast, and they pray. They become acquainted with His will and His ways. They know Him by both precept and experience. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:28). Being a Christ follower isn't necessarily about a religious education, or adherence to a set of rules. Instead, it involves a personal experience centered of a real relationship with the living God!

Professing believers will never undergo true spiritual transformation until they learn to be "with" Jesus, to abide in Him (John 10:10). One commentator has remarked: "The foundational reality of discipleship is to be in the presence of Jesus, to hear and learn from his teaching, and to be trained by him for the mission with which he entrusts his followers."⁹ Fortunately, Jesus' first disciples grasped this reality. Their intimacy with our Lord would later result in a powerful testimony. The book of Acts records: "When they observed the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed and recognized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

Power in Proclaiming

Mark's gospel makes it clear that proclamation of the gospel was a main part of Jesus' purpose in calling His disciples. Mark 3:14 said, "...he also named apostles, to be with him, *to send them out to preach*." Later in Mark's gospel, Mark would confirm that preaching was an integral part of the disciples' ministry. In Mark 6:12, we read, "So they went out and preached that people should repent." The disciples were faithful to preach the same message their master preach (Mark 1:15). In time, the Lord would commission them to preach beyond the bounds of Israel and into all the world (Mark 6:15).

For the purpose of our current study, it is interesting to note Mark's emphasis on the way Jesus empowered the Twelve to preach. Mark 3:15 said He gave them "...authority to drive out demons." Earlier in our study, we discovered that Jesus had power Himself to perform such a feat (Mark 2:10). In being the same ability as Jesus, the disciples were endowed with supernatural power for ministry. At the end of Mark's gospel, the Lord would grant similar powers to the Twelve (Mark 16:17-18).

The application for us from such things is simple. The Lord is faithful to empower His followers for gospel ministry. None must minister in his or her own strength. Via the presence of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:16) and the power of the

⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 72.

⁹ Schnabel, 86.

Word of God (Hebrews 4:12), believers have supernatural resources for ministering the gospel. The arm of the flesh will fail, but the power of God can save. Through the Spirit's might, disciples can be used for the conversion and sanctifying of souls. As you seek to minister for Jesus, remember that your sufficiency comes from Christ in you.

Diversity in the Body

Another insight found in Jesus' selection of the Twelve relates to the diversity of the group. By reading through Mark's words in Mark 3:15-19, we discern that the group wasn't made up of cookie-cutter clones. The men were of different backgrounds, occupations, and life experiences. From the outset of the church, the Lord championed diversity amongst His body. We are reminded from Mark's account that the church is made up of unique members who are all spiritually gifted in different ways to fulfill the mission of the church (Romans 12:6-8). Such realities should move us to patiently and faithfully serve along side other brothers and sisters for the glory of Christ.

COMMISSIONING THE TWELVE (READ MARK 6:7-13)

While Mark 1:16-20 tells of Jesus's selection of the first four disciples, and while Mark 3:13-19 tells of His appointment of the group of twelve, Mark 6:7-13 tells of the first occasion in which He dispatched His disciples to minister by themselves. The account is telling for us. It reveals several lessons about gospel ministry. Disciples of all generations can look to the text for insight regarding how one should witness for Jesus in a fallen world.

One of the most helpful insights from Jesus' commissioning of the Twelve is found in verse 11. Our Lord knew believer must be skillful at dealing with critics. Those who witness for Jesus will encounter many who reject the gospel. As a result, our Lord told His first disciples, "If any place does not welcome you or listen to you, when you leave there, shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them" (Mark 6:11). The Lord's advice was pertinent in light of the events in the preceding passage (Mark 6:1-6). Because of the hostility Jesus had already faced (Mark 3:6), it was to be expected that His disciples would encounter similar resistance.

The act of shaking dust off of one's feet was a custom amongst ancient Jews. When one left a Gentile region, he or she shook the unclean soil of the land off of their feet. It was a way of deeming a certain town as heathen territory.¹⁰ By prescribing this custom for early gospel ministry, Jesus indicated that first-century Jews would by-and-large reject Him. In shaking dust off of their feet, the disciples would demonstrate that their fellow Jews were really no better off than Gentiles. Those who rejected the call to believe in Christ revealed that they weren't truly a part of God's chosen people. The early Church followed Jesus' injunction (Acts 15:19).

In the end, the act was symbolic of judgment to come. Jesus said it would be a "testimony against" those who rejected the gospel. The King James Version makes this more clear through the addition of the declaration, "It shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city." The disciples' act of

¹⁰ Edwards, 181.

shaking dust off their feet was a witness of judgment that would one day fall on those who rejected their message.¹¹ Those who snubbed their noses at the gospel were no better than Gentiles (Romans 2:28-29), and they would one day give an account for their unbelief (Revelation 20:11-15).

In ministering the gospel, disciples will always encounter resistance. Not everyone will believe. In fact, the vast majority will reject the gospel. Evangelists must not lose heart. They should prepare themselves for rejection. In addition, they should have a confidence in Christ, knowing that all gospel-rejecters will soon face the wrath of God. While there is often a temptation to be fearful of rejection, knowledge concerning pending judgment will produce pity towards spiritually stubborn people.

TAKING UP YOUR CROSS (MARK 8:34)

In Mark 8:34, we find some of Jesus' most pertinent and pointed instruction to His twelve disciples. The verse is an important one, as it appears immediately after His first prophecy concerning His death and resurrection (Mark 8:31-33). Stunned by Jesus' prophecy, Peter denied that such things would happen. Jesus rebuked Peter, invoking the name of Satan (Mark 8:33).

After issuing His stern rebuke, Jesus said, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Our Lord's words were intended to depict the true path of discipleship. Peter and the others had been blind concerning what it meant to be a disciple. Jesus' words highlighted three priorities the Twelve needed to embrace. They provide insight for disciples of all generations.

It is important to note that Jesus' instruction in Mark 8:34 was not primarily focused on Christian salvation. Yes, things like self-denial can be found in the act of conversion; however, Jesus' focus was more on the process of sanctification. Disciples are converted through regeneration and the faith that accompanies the new birth. They do not earn their salvation through self-denial, bearing a cross, or following Jesus. Such activities can be likened to spiritual fruits that grow from the spiritual root of grace. With such things in mind, let's examine three activities that should be found in the lives of all of Jesus' disciples.

Self-Denial

First, Jesus said disciples should "deny" themselves. Such denial shouldn't be trivialized. Our Lord didn't have in mind the act of saying no to sweets, desserts, a frivolous purchase, or some other minuscule thing. Nor did he mean to infer that one needed to engage in non-biblical ascetic practices like Lent or self-flagellation. Instead, our Lord championed a dramatic reorientation of one's life perspective. Disciples aren't to live by the "pride of life" that occupies the souls and minds of so many people. One has explained the meaning of Christian self-denial, saying, "It is to renounce the self as the dominant element in life. It is to replace the self with God-in-Christ as the object of affections. It is to place the divine will before self-will."¹²

¹¹ Schnabel, 139.

¹² Brooks, 137.

Carry the Cross

Second, Jesus said disciples must “take up” the cross. Contrary to popular opinion, our Lord’s instruction didn’t refer to the act of persisting through a trial. Some nowadays talk about their “cross to bear” in relation to an annoying co-worker, a rebellious child, a bad haircut, or a nagging health concern. In the first-century world, a cross was an object of shame. It was a horrifically ignoble sign of crime and capital punishment. By telling His disciples to carry their cross, He implied that the demands of discipleship evoke a degree of humiliation before an unbelieving world. If disciples want to be good witnesses for Jesus, they must be willing to embrace shame for Christ (Romans 1:16).

Follow Jesus

Jesus’ last instruction was for disciples to “follow” Him. His words provided a repeat of what He told Peter, Andrew, James, and John when He first called them. Our Lord’s reputation revealed that “following” is at the heart of the Christian life. To be a strong disciple, one must have “a continuing determination to stick to the chosen path” of Christ.¹³ This involves following His example, yielding to His doctrine, and drawing strength to His inward presence.

Today’s Disciples

There are only twelve official disciples for all of time; however, there is a sense in which all believers are disciples. Each Christian is called to follow and learn from Jesus. The first band of disciples provide a precedent for believers of all generations. Though the Twelve struggled and failed at times, they eventually provided a powerful witness for the Lord. The church was built upon their bold, unwavering testimony (Ephesians 2:20). May the Lord raise up a generation of new disciples who deny themselves, take up the cross, and faithfully follow Jesus.

¹³ Schnabel, 204.