



A Life That We Can Live

Imitating Christ

Introduction to the Study

The very first lines of Acts tell us the connection between the mission of Jesus and the mission of God's people. Luke tells us that in his former Gospel he wrote "about all that Jesus *began to do and teach*" (Acts 1:1). The obvious inference is that in Acts, Luke is going to write about all that Jesus *continues to do and teach* by the Spirit and through his community of disciples. Continuing the life and mission and Jesus is not just one more task given to his disciples. Rather, it defines their very identity and purpose in God's ongoing story.

Jesus tells them that they will "receive power when the Holy Spirit" comes upon them, and that they will be his "witnesses," telling people about him everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7-8). After spending years with Jesus — walking beside him, learning from his teaching, watching his actions, and witnessing his death and resurrection, the apostles' own lives and teaching would witness to Christ and invite others into his story.

In fact, the first thing to which Jesus' followers commit themselves is "the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42), which would be, as NT Wright observes, "the story of Jesus, particularly his life, death, and resurrection, told as the climax of the story of God and Israel, and thus offering itself as both the true story of the world and the energizing force for the church's mission." At the heart of the apostle's teaching is the good news of the story of Jesus. Together they devoted themselves to Christ, persisted in learning his ways, and diligently practiced his teachings. Through these channels Jesus works by the Spirit to create the new life of the kingdom in the church's midst. Out of their shared *life* arise *words* and *deeds* that point others to Jesus and the Spirit as the source of their new life.

Like that first community of followers, we are entrusted with the story of Jesus and given the vocation of bringing it to life in the world. He is our teacher; we are his disciples. Our job is to watch and listen, ask questions, seek answers, and put them into practice. Then and now, Jesus is working with people who have begun the journey, and he wants us to take the next steps. This is a life we can live.

Lesson 1: A Life of Purpose

Introduction

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus calls his disciples to a life a purpose with two key phrases: “Follow me” and “Come and see.” These simple words are incredibly instructive. We don’t learn the deepest lessons any other way than apprenticeship, in seeing over the shoulder and through the heart of those who have something to teach us. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas maintains that just as we learn brick laying only through apprenticeship, so too we learn to love our neighbor, to seek justice, and to serve one another only through apprenticeship. And he’s right, we don’t learn anything that matters any other way. In the best of learning, in the truest learning, words have to become flesh.

We begin this series by exploring Jesus’ call to his first disciples, that small group of apprentices who, after being called by Jesus, would see his words become flesh as they spent the next three years by his side, listening to his teachings, and learning from his actions. In due time, they be the ones who were inviting others to experience the same life to which Jesus first called them.

Particularly in Luke, the call to follow Jesus is a call to imitate him, and in Acts we see the disciples continuing to do what Jesus began during his ministry. Jesus blessed the poor and the outcast; he ate with the excluded and defended them against the religious authorities. Jesus showed compassion to the weak, the sick, and the small, and in these matters the disciples needed both teaching and practice to follow Jesus’ example. Like those first disciples, we can follow and learn from Jesus only when we see clearly who he is. The stories of their calling challenge us to hear Jesus’ call to us today. He invites us to leave our “nets” and become his disciples by faithfully following his lead.

Jesus Calls His First Disciples (Luke 5:1-11)

The call of the first disciples appears early on in the ministry of Jesus. Up to this point in Luke’s Gospel, the main events of Jesus’ ministry have been his baptism (3:21-22), his temptation in the wilderness (4:1-13), his inaugural sermon and rejection at Nazareth (4:16-30), and a series of healings (4:31-41). More immediately, there is a series of events that includes his going to a deserted place to be alone, being sought out by crowds of people, and teaching in synagogues (4:42-44).

Our text opens with Jesus beside Lake Gennesaret, which is another name for the Sea of Galilee. He borrows a boat that belongs to a fisherman named Simon. In Luke’s Gospel, this is not Simon’s first encounter with Jesus. Jesus has already been to Simon’s home in Capernaum and has healed his mother-in-law (4:38-39). Perhaps that explains Simon’s willingness to let Jesus use his fishing boat as a pulpit. From there Jesus teaches crowds of people.

Simon had been fishing all night with no success, then working from the early morning hours cleaning his nets. Most likely he was exhausted and looking forward to going home. So it must have seemed a bit of an imposition when Jesus got into Simon’s boat and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Nevertheless, Simon did what Jesus asked (5:1-3).

Luke does not tell us what Jesus taught the crowds that morning. The focus is on what follows. Jesus tells Simon to put out into the deep water and let down his nets for a catch. Simon obviously believes this will be a waste of time. He is the professional fisherman, after all. We can almost hear the frustration in his voice when he responds, “Master, we worked hard all last night and didn’t catch a thing. But if you say so, I’ll let the nets down again.” (5:4-5).

We know what happens next. This time their nets were so full of fish they began to tear. Soon both boats were filled with fish and on the verge of sinking (5:6-7). After this miraculous catch, Simon is overwhelmed and awestruck by the number of fish they had caught, as were his partners, James and John. Falling to his knees, Simon said, “Oh, Lord, please leave me—I’m such a sinful man” (5:8-10). In the midst of his ordinary routine, and in fact, after a rather unsuccessful night at work, he is encountered by one who changes everything.

Jesus responds to Simon by saying, “Don’t be afraid! From now on you’ll be fishing for people!” And as soon as they landed, they left everything and followed Jesus (5:10-11). Johnson describes the striking nature of what happens next: “Although they have just brought in the greatest catch of their fishing careers, Simon Peter, James, and John leave those boatloads of fish behind and follow Jesus. Their encounter with Jesus has completely reoriented their lives.”

From Catching Fish to Catching People

At the heart of this scene is Jesus’ call to the fishermen to leave their nets and give themselves to the work of the kingdom. The metaphor “fishers of men,” or “catching people,” is striking because it arises out of the situation and because it’s a clever play on words. The fishermen are themselves caught by Jesus and given a new vocation. They will become representatives of their teacher, agents of the kingdom, and in due time, leaders of the church in its mission.

In the context of this story, Alan Culpepper makes three important observations about discipleship:

1. **We do nothing to warrant or merit Jesus’ call.** Regardless of what Jesus may have seen in the fisherman, he certainly did not call the most capable or most qualified candidates to be his first disciples. The fishermen were not called because of their qualifications, character, or potential.
2. **Jesus is at work in the ordinary places of our lives.** The call to discipleship did not come in a traditional holy place (like the temple or synagogue) but in the midst of the fishermen’s daily work. The point is significant not because God doesn’t call people in a holy place (see Zechariah in Luke 1) but because it’s a further sign of the work of God’s kingdom reaching into the arena of everyday human life.

Background (Luke 5:11, 27-29; 6:12)

Jesus’ gathering of disciples was not unusual in his time and Jewish setting. Many rabbis would gather students around them to teach Torah. But the *kind* of disciples Jesus gathers is unusual – they are not theological professionals. Fishermen, tax collectors, former revolutionaries and just plain old sinners make up this new community. Their calls do not come in a temple or synagogue but in the midst of their daily work.

As they leave everything and follow him, Jesus launches them on a journey with God. The lesson is that we need not be perfect to come to God; rather, we need to trust God and let him do his gracious work in transforming our lives.

–Darrell Bock, *Luke*, p. 98

3. **Jesus' call to discipleship doesn't take us outside of our ordinary settings in life, but challenges us to see them differently.** The metaphor of fishing suggests various aspects of the disciples' role in relation to Jesus and the kingdom; he will give them purpose no matter where they are. This call of the kingdom requires a reversal of priorities and a reordering of commitments. Now they will live by Jesus' teachings and call others to Jesus just as they themselves have been called. They left everything and "they followed him." He will give purpose to their lives from now on.

Our Calling, Purpose, and Vocation

When the late co-founder and CEO of Apple, Steve Jobs, wanted to lure Pepsi's top executive to Apple, he asked him one simple question: "*Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life, or do you want to come with me and change the world?*" I imagine this quote resonates with many of us. At some point we all wonder about the impact of our lives. Don't we all have the desire for our lives to count for something meaningful?

Our text reminds us of how Jesus calls ordinary people into a life of extraordinary purpose. As Culpepper notes, "these are simple fishermen, and they are simply doing what they did every day. They are minding their own business, cleaning their nets after a long, particularly discouraging night of work, when Jesus comes along, enters into their utterly normal, mundane lives and changes everything."

The idea of being called changes the way we think of ourselves and of our place in the world. It tells us that the purpose of life is not to find ourselves, but to give of ourselves; or, perhaps better, that we find ourselves only by giving ourselves on behalf of others. We grow into this vocation of doing the work of God (to love our neighbor, to seek justice, to serve one another, to care for all life) as we watch, learn from, and imitate Jesus, our teacher and Lord.

Growth is a key idea here. Throughout scripture we see God calling people to do God's work, receiving them as they are, and then shaping them into faithful servants. To be sure, Jesus doesn't wait for Simon and the others to shape up or look the part. He receives Simon as he is, tells him not to be afraid, and calls him to a new mission of catching people.

Seeing our lives through the lens of vocation doesn't take us outside of our ordinary settings in life, but challenges us to see them differently. We all are called to reorient our priorities to align with God's priorities, to use the gifts God has given us in service to others, to share the good news of Christ in word and deed. There's no stage of our lives where thinking about our calling isn't relevant simply because it is God who calls us, depends on us, and wants to work through us every day.

Peter himself acknowledges in this scene that he and his partners are failures at their job. They have fished all night and have caught "nothing."

The very reason Jesus can commandeer Simon's boat is because there are no fish in it -- plenty of seat room available!

Jesus does not call these men because they have exhibited gifts and graces for apostleship (or even for fishing). Jesus calls them after he has shown that he can catch fish through them when they cannot do so on their own. Simon is not called to "catch people" because he will be good at it, but because Jesus can do it through him.

– Wesley Allen

This means one thing for a **student** away at school. It means another for a **parent** or **grandparent**. It means something else for a **doctor**, a **business owner**, a **teacher**, or an **accountant**. It means yet another thing in **our marriages** and **our families**, with **our friends** and **our neighbors**. Whether in our work, our relationships, and our everyday interactions, God calls us to touch the world with his love, to redeem and make holy. No matter where we are or who we're with, the life of Christ is a life we can live.

And as Johnson reminds us, **Jesus' mission for us does not wait until we think we are ready:**

The need for the gospel in this broken world is far too urgent. We are called right now -- even in spite of our failures and doubts, even in the midst of our ordinary, busy, complicated lives. Jesus' word to Simon Peter is also a word to us: 'Do not be afraid.'

This is Jesus' mission, and we trust that he will keep working with us and through us, 'catching' others as he has caught us -- in the deep, wide net of God's mercy and love. We trust, finally, that the catch is in God's hands, and that God's desire is for the nets to be bursting and the boats full.

Leaving our own nets is the first step, and it's already a commitment. Staying on the journey, letting that experience transform us, and realizing we can do even more requires courage and community.

Then and now, Jesus is working with people who have begun the journey, and he wants us to take the next steps.

Discussion

1. What are some things that you've learned to do only by watching someone else do them? Who was your teacher and what did you learn by watching? Since that time, have you taught someone else how to do what you learned?
2. When the late co-founder and CEO of Apple, Steve Jobs, wanted to lure Pepsi's top executive to Apple, he asked him one simple question: "Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life, or do you want to come with me and change the world?" How does this quote resonate with you? Don't we all want our lives to count for something important? Why do you think that's the case?
3. Why do you think Jesus would want someone like Peter to join him in mission? What does this say about Peter? What does this say about Jesus? What does this say about us?
4. How often do we resist Jesus' claim on our lives because what he is calling us to do seems too difficult, too impractical? What are some things that hold you back?
5. What does the word "vocation" mean to you? Does anything change in your life if you think of yourself as called by God and entrusted with special responsibilities? How is God calling you to use your time, talents, and treasures for his purposes?