

Following Jesus Luke 5:1-11

Not long after Jesus began his public ministry, he moved into its second phase, summoning followers. This theme unites the passage, and its lessons for us.

Day 1: Luke 5:1-10 Someone worth following

Matthew and Mark begin their versions of this narrative abruptly: Jesus is walking beside a lake, meets two fishermen, invites them to become his disciples, and they immediately drop everything to follow him (Mark 1:16-18; Matt 1:18-22). Luke fills in more of the background.

What would motivate Peter, James, and John to disrupt their lives in order to follow a new, unauthorized, itinerant religious teacher? His spectacular supernatural power was obviously key: though a non-professional, he guides vocational fishermen, at the worst time of day for fishing, and they catch so many in one cast that their nets tear and two boats sink. Anyone who has ever spent a futile day fishing knows that something miraculous is going on here: they are intimidated, astounded, scared by such power. They do not know what it is, but they know it is worth finding out more.

While we rarely – if ever – see such physical miracles today, we have more compelling knowledge of Christ than they had at this point: his power over death, his own and ours; his love, that he would sacrifice himself for us; his constancy, that he is the same today as he was two thousand years ago and will be two thousand years from now; his faithfulness, that he always cares for us. Such attributes draw out our devotion.

Day 2: Luke 5:8 Someone not worthy to be a follower

In the presence of power which could only be divine, Peter's instinctive reaction is to draw back. The divine is not only powerful, it is holy, and so highlights not only Peter's impotence but also his fallenness: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" In this regard, he perceives both Jesus and himself more clearly than the crowd does: they tried to keep Jesus from leaving (4:42); Peter tries to get him to leave (5:8). Instead, Jesus invites Peter along (5:10).

This interaction is familiar to anyone who comes to know Christ: a sense of his purity and our deep unworthiness, followed by his cleansing invitation.

If you have never committed your life to Christ, this is the only way, acknowledging your unworthiness. At the same time, this is his way: to welcome you despite your unworthiness.

If you have committed your life to Christ, this is grounds for gratitude. He welcomes the unworthy, which affords us all hope.

Day 3: Luke 5:10b The commissioning of followers

The Bible has many standard literary forms, recognizable to careful readers, and redolent with meaningful associations. One of these recurring forms is the commissioning narrative.

When God commissioned Moses, the process entailed: (a) a supernatural encounter, (b) a commission, (c) a protest of inadequacy, and (d) a word of reassurance (Exod 3:1-12). When God commissioned Isaiah, the process entailed: (a) a supernatural encounter, (c) a protest of inadequacy, (d) a word of reassurance, and (b) a commission (Isa 6:1-7). When Jesus commissions the disciples, the process entails: (a) a supernatural encounter, (c) a protest of inadequacy, (d) a word of reassurance, and (b) a commission (Luke 5:4-10). So in a sense that we can perceive more clearly in hindsight than Peter, James and John could have understood at the time, their commissioning put them in a category comparable to Moses and Isaiah (just as it put Jesus in a category with God).

What does this mean for us? Ours is certainly not the same level of commissioning, and Luke never suggests that it is. These were the founding apostles of the Church, along with the late-commissioned Paul. So Luke's primary intent is to call the church of his day to submit to these Jesus-appointed founding apostles. Subsequently Scripture never records anyone else as having either such a direct commissioning from Christ, or the status of the original apostles.

Nonetheless, arguably today there is a class of people who have an analogical commissioning. And not just pastors or missionaries. But all who are called to 'catch' people. That is to say, all of us. Our encounter with God is metaphorical, yet it too is not just an encounter of salvation, but also one of commissioning. Truly we are inadequate, but God reassures us that he is still in the business of using those who are inadequate.

Day 4: Luke 5:10b The task of followers

It is instructive to consider what Jesus could have said when he called Peter, James and John. He could have invited them to come and enjoy him. He could have invited them to come and form a new community, and enjoy each other. He could have invited them to come and chill. Each of these – or at least the first two – are part of what’s involved in being a Christian. Yet he does not prioritize any of them here. Instead, he is on a mission, and he calls them to come and join him in his ministry. In particular, he invites them to ‘catch’ people.

The metaphor sometimes makes the squeamish uncomfortable. After all, catching fish entails deception, enticement, inflicting pain, and death. Of course, every analogy draws one or more points of similarity between two largely different things. The point(s) of this analogy here have less to do with the negatives of fishing than with removing from one sphere of existence (water, sin) to another sphere of existence (land, or life). So Jesus offers the disciples a higher calling, to exchange their small ambitions (economic survival) for big ambitions (transforming individual eternities).

The minute we talk like that, the question becomes, “Does God call me to give up my job for vocational ministry?” Of course he does. There’s only two paths in life: pursuing mammon or pursuing God.

Eschewing irony (I would admit to sarcasm, but pastors are not meant to be sarcastic), the obvious answer is that Jesus does not intend for all of us to get off the professional track to enter vocational ministry, any more than he intended his first-century followers to do so. At the same time, giving oneself to the headlong pursuit of wealth is not the only alternative. Whatever our vocation, Jesus calls us all to pursue a single avocation: to influence individual eternal destinies.

In fact, this is often more easily done through the workplace, which provides access to people who have never heard the gospel. What concrete efforts can you make to pursue your avocation in the course of your vocation?

Day 5: Luke 5:11 The cost of following

Peter, James and John left everything to travel with Jesus: their businesses, their families, their homes, and their security.

So the obvious question is, “Must we?” The reflexive response is, “Of course not.” But this sets up another false dichotomy: either leave everything to follow Christ, or leave nothing but simply add Christ on. Nowhere in Scripture does God or Jesus ever give indication of a willingness to be an add-on to our lives, something to bring added value while leaving the basic structure of our lives in place.

Our lives divide into priorities and hobbies. Priorities enter and take over, requiring major changes in lifestyle; hobbies are the sorts of things we engage in for pleasure and satisfaction, entail no obligation, and require little commitment. Casual dating is a hobby; marriage, a priority. Having friends is largely a hobby nowadays (it was not always thus); having children, a priority (or it used to be).

Is God your priority or your hobby? Is the corporate life of this church community your priority or your hobby? Is ministry your priority or your hobby? Whatever the answer in theory, the answer in practice is evident in the level of disruption God, church, and ministry create in your life. When life gets too busy, what do you drop out of your schedule to make room for the essentials? Whatever drops out is, by definition, your hobby; what remains are your priorities. When your life gets full, do God, community and ministry get cut, or are they non-negotiables?

Day 6: Luke 5:1 Finding Jesus

In concluding our reflections on this passage, we return to its first line.

The bulk of the account is about following Jesus: he is worth devoting our lives to; we are not worthy to devote our lives to him yet he welcomes us; as his followers, he commissions us; he calls us to join his mission; that calling will cost us.

Its opening verse reminds us how – and where – Jesus is to be found, and by whom he is found. This entire event came about because the people sought it: “the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God.” They sought God; they found Jesus. They sought God in his Word; Jesus met them there. They pursued God; Jesus caught them.

It still works this way: we chase Jesus, and he catches us, in the Word of God. Not just in hurried, perfunctory reading to assuage guilt. But in taking the time to understand Scripture, to pray over it, and to live it out.