

Disciples Decided to Follow— Mark 1:16–20

The initial investors in companies like IBM and Wal-Mart, who held on to their investments, have experienced enormous returns. But far greater was the decision of four men to follow Jesus Christ. At that time there were no Christians. It was before there was a church. They were at the beginning of a 2000-year worldwide movement that today includes more than two billion people around the world who would acknowledge that they are followers of Jesus Christ.

The decision of Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow Jesus was one of the greatest decisions in the Bible and one of the greatest decisions in human history. The story is recorded in Mark 1:16-20.

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and they followed him.

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

When Jesus chose these men to be part of his inner circle, he could have had absolutely anyone; yet he chose ordinary men. There is something of a surprise to that. One set of logic says that if you want to influence society, the place to begin is at the top. Get people of power and you will get everyone else. You would think that Jesus might have gone for those who had power: political leaders or religious leaders, rabbis, Pharisees, the clergy types of his day. But instead, he chose commoners — men without great positions and with no formal religious training, men who, it would turn out, would change the world as few others have ever done; and they would do it by the power of Jesus

Christ rather than on the basis of credentials.

Today, some two thousand years later, there are millions of Christians around this country praying for some type of great spiritual awakening in this nation. I believe there are clear signs that it is going to happen. The rumblings can be heard. The sparks that will produce the flames can already be seen. It is in home Bible studies and neighborhood prayer gatherings. It is in the prayers of individual people. It is in the transformation of families. It’s in churches that people have given up on. It is in every denomination across the country. But what is interesting is there are no headquarters. There is no charismatic leader. There is no one who seems to be orchestrating it all. It is as if God is again doing something like he did two thousand years ago, calling ordinary people like Peter, Andrew, James and John and us today.

When Jesus called them he simply said to them, “Come and follow me.” It was a call to a person, not to a set of religious beliefs; not to some church, club, society or denomination; not to some set of rules. It was a call to a person, the man Jesus. And therein is the essence of what distinguishes Christianity from

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every other major religion of the world.

If someone were to ask the question, “What is a Christian?” there are many who would say that a Christian is someone who reads the Bible and believes what it says. A Christian is someone who prays, goes to church, gives away money and does good for other people. Wrong answers! These are things that a Christian does, but not what a Christian is.

A Christian is someone who has a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. A Christian is someone who is a follower of Jesus.

When those early disciples agreed to follow Jesus, there is no way that they could possibly understand what they were getting themselves into. They didn’t dream that they would, in part, be-

come the authors of the Bible. They had no idea that three out of the four of them would die painful deaths as martyrs. They never dreamed that they were in on the ground floor of what unquestionably is the greatest movement in all of human history.

Jesus called them to himself, but he also called them to a task. Get the order straight. For if you cut the sentence in half you will still have the essence of it when Jesus said, “*Come, follow me.*” But he added to that, “*and I will make you fishers of men.*” He had something of a pyramid plan in mind. Jesus would select the first few and they would recruit others who would recruit others and it would expand and expand and expand until eventually, in the dream of Jesus, all of the human race would be reached. It was a brilliant plan from the very start, and he wanted to be sure that they understood the task that he would involve them in. The call was to a person. But the commitment to the person is expressed in the tasks that we do.

If you say that you are in love with someone and there are no actions to show your love, the words are meaningless. The demonstration of love is through our actions. To be a follower of Jesus Christ is not just mental assent. It’s not just saying, “I’m a Christian.” It is the recognition that the public proof of our commitment to Jesus is in the behavior that acts out the commitment that we have made.

It seems as though these four men — Simon (later nicknamed Peter), Andrew, James and John — made their decision to follow Jesus rather quickly. But it was probably not the first time that they had seen or heard Jesus. They were probably familiar with his advance man, John the Baptist. And I suspect that they may have been on the periphery of the early small crowds that came to hear Jesus teach. When the word began to spread that here was a man who spoke like no other man has ever spoken, Simon, Andrew, James and John might have seen his character and felt drawn to him.

When Jesus spoke directly and personally to them, they did not hesitate. They realized that he was sent by God. I understand that. Every week

in churches everywhere, there are thousands who gather together around the person of Jesus Christ. There are men and women who seek to be on the periphery of the crowd to check it out, to just listen and size things up. Some come for weeks, some for months and some actually for years, and then an astoundingly personal thing happens. There comes one time when it is as if Jesus Christ speaks directly, calling a person by name. They decide to step out of the crowd and decide to say “yes” to Jesus and become his follower.

One of the things I find most fascinating about these first four disciples is the way they just decided to go with Jesus and walked away from their careers and families. I struggle with understanding how they were able to do that. They were fishermen at a time when fishing was a major food industry.

Josephus is a great historian of the first century in Palestine. Josephus wrote that the typical person in those days ate meat at most once per week, but fish was a regular part of their diet. The Sea of Galilee (really only a large, but deep, lake) was a significant source of that fish. Josephus said there were 330 fishing boats harvesting the Sea of Galilee around Jesus’ time. They actually exported their fish all the way to Rome and to the palace of Caesar.

These fishermen had good jobs in a flourishing industry. They owned nets and boats. Two of them were in business with their father, so it was not only a prosperous business but it was a long-term family business. But when they heard Jesus say, “Come with me,” they walked. They left their boats, their jobs, their income; it was a stunning sacrifice. All I can say is that they must have been overwhelmingly impressed with this Jesus in order to give up everything to follow him.

It was then that they decided to do exactly what Jesus had called them to — to follow him as a person. They knew something that a lot of us intuitively know. If you marry the right person, if you have the right boss, if you have the right mentor or the right teacher in your life, somehow all the other circumstances of life either fall in place or they simply don’t matter. But if the wrong person be-

comes very important in your life, everything else can turn out to be a mess.

Years ago we had a family physician who was wonderful. He not only was a fine physician but he became a good personal friend. It was in those years with births and young children in our family, and he was there with us in the delivery room and often in the emergency room as well. It's always embarrassing to go to the emergency room with your children so often that everyone knows you by name!

It was somewhat traumatic for us when Dr. Stacey decided to leave his family practice to enter a residency in anesthesiology at the University of Colorado Medical School in Denver. About half way through the residency his mentor, the head of the program, took a different job in Canada. Dr. Stacey rented out his home and took his entire family and moved to another country in order to finish out his residency under his mentor. I remember asking him why he would do something like that. It seemed crazy to me. I said, "Why not stick with the program and finish out your residency and not disrupt your life?" His answer was simple and direct. He told me that he had chosen to follow the man, not the program.

That's what Simon and Andrew and James and John decided to do. If they could have Jesus, they would make everything else in life fit with him. They did not decide to follow a program; they did not decide to follow a church; they did not decide to follow a doctrine; they decided to follow a person.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if these four fishermen had decided to say no. What would have become of them? Would they have been lost in obscurity and mediocrity? Would the Gospel of Jesus Christ never have spread? Or would Jesus have given up on them and said, "If you're not interested then I'm going to move down the shoreline and find somebody else who is."

I suppose you could say there's no need to

speculate because their answer was a resounding "yes!" And it is from their great decision that we get some principles that help us in our great spiritual decisions of life.

The first principle is in some ways the most important Christian principle of all, and that is to answer Jesus' call to discipleship. Obviously, Mark 1:16–20 is intended to be more than an historical record. It is more than an account of Jesus and four fishermen. It is intended for us to read it personally as our call to follow Jesus.

To be a follower of Jesus Christ requires a deliberate and drastic decision to commit my life to him. It is a radical choice because it is an agreement in advance to follow him wherever he leads, to give him whatever he asks and to do whatever he says. It is like signing a contract where the terms have not yet been spelled out or signing a blank check. It means being willing to quit your job, leave your business and make Jesus more important than family, friends or anyone else.

The second principle is that going ahead requires leaving behind. This principle is particularly relevant to deciding to follow Jesus.

I once had a conversation with a movie producer that often reminds me of this principle. He told me about making a film that included a performance by a trapeze artist at a circus. During the many days of filming he got to know these athletes and one day, during a break, one of them offered him a chance to

try the trapeze. Unlike me (I got a little queasy just watching the movie!), he actually climbed up the ladder, grabbed the

trapeze and swung back and forth. His friend the trapeze artist tried to convince him to swing from the first trapeze to the second. You've heard the expression "easier said than done?" Well, he swung back and forth but he never could let go of the first. He never did it.

I can understand that because I find that it is far easier to add new things to my life than it is to let go of old things in my life. It's hard to let go of

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the security of that which I understand even if I don't like it. I don't like to give up what I've got in order to move on to something that is new and better. But the principle is that going ahead requires leaving behind. When Jesus calls us to be his followers, he often calls us to leave behind something, or more painfully, someone or someplace. He says, "*Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.*" When he said, "Follow me," he was saying to be ready to give up anything in order to be his follower.

The third principle is one that we have already talked about: Christian faith always involves Christian action. We cannot simply say, "I am a Christian," and do nothing about it. It always includes some task, some action, some expression of belief. If we really believe something, then we're going to act on it. We need to be constantly asking ourselves if our words and actions show that we are followers of Jesus.

The final principle from the story of this great decision of these four men is that following Jesus transforms life. If we follow Jesus, we're different than we were before; our worldview is different; our relationships are altered; our goals in life become completely different. It's changing from whatever we have been to someone that is new.

It is like a prominent political figure switching from one party to the other. Can you imagine what that would do to the lives of these people? It would change their friends; it would change their relationships; it would change just about everything in their lives, to switch their loyalty that way.

Far greater is switching your loyalty to Jesus Christ. It transforms life. It changes your habits,

your relationships, your attitudes – everything is different for anyone who answers the call of Jesus to follow him.

Are you a follower of Jesus Christ? Have you decided to say "yes" to his call on your life? I know that many have long ago decided to follow Jesus. I also know that there are those who are merely part of the crowd, although they have thought a lot about it.

I have a challenge for us all. It is to make the greatest decision of life. Whether you have done it before or have never done it, listen to Jesus as he calls your name and says, "*Come, follow me.*" I invite you to join with me and make this your prayer.

Jesus, I have heard your call to follow you and my answer is YES. I acknowledge you as my Savior and as the leader of my life. I promise that I will follow you wherever you go. I will do whatever you ask. I will let go of anything or anyone for you. I am your disciple. Amen

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