Studies In The Gospel of Matthew: A Primer for Discipleship

Lesson Three

Called to Follow Jesus

Focal Text
Matthew 4:12-22

Background
Matthew 4:12-25

Main Idea
Jesus changed the disciples’ lives when they responded to his call, “Follow me.”

Question to Explore
What kind of response does Jesus’ challenge, “Follow me,” call for?

Quick Read
When we “fish for men,” we extend Jesus’ Kingdom and ministry today.

Commentary

The boy was very young when his father died, and his family was so poor that the creditors took everything, including the firewood. Their family was so poor as he grew up that when they went to church, his mother had them carry their socks and shoes until they got within sight of the church, then put them on—so they wouldn’t wear them out.

The young man began to work in his uncle’s shoe store in Boston. During that time, a Sunday School teacher named Ezra Kimball led him to faith in Christ as his Lord. He later moved to Chicago to make his fortune selling shoes. Instead he became heavily involved in ministering to needy children and youth through Sunday School. Finding no other place for them to meet, associated encourage him to begin a church, and so he did. He was a layman, never licensed or ordained, and yet in his day he grew the largest church in the world.  

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Then, in Dublin, Ireland, he heard a man named Henry Varley say in a sermon, “The world has yet to see what God will do with, and for, and through, and in, and by the man who is wholly consecrated to him.” He decided then and there to be that man.² And it is believed that 100 million people heard the gospel through Dwight L. Moody.

Can one person change the world?

This week we will watch Jesus begin his public ministry in Capernaum. We will listen as he calls businessmen to join his Kingdom enterprise. And we will decide whether to join them.

If we follow our Lord, he will use our lives to change our world. If not, he won’t. Choose wisely.

**Be strategic (4:12-16)**

After Jesus’ baptism, he “was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil” (Matthew 4:1). Here he refused to use his divine power to meet his own needs (Matt. 4:2-4), impress the crowds (4:5-7), or serve the enemy (4:8-11).

Now Matthew picks up the narrative: “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee” (4:12). Matthew doesn’t tell us how Jesus “heard” (*akousas*, meaning *received the news*) that John the Baptist had been imprisoned. Perhaps John’s disciples brought him the news, or the event became so significant that the populace was discussing it.

Matthew 14 tells us the larger story: John opposed Herod Antipas’ decision to cohabit with his brother’s wife, a clear violation of the Law (Leviticus 18:16). Herod, the ruler of Judea, wanted to kill John but feared his popularity (Matt. 14:5), and so Herod imprisoned him instead. John was eventually beheaded at the request of Herod’s wife and her daughter (14:6-12).

Jesus knew that his close identity with John’s ministry would limit his ability to travel and serve in Judea during this time, and so “he returned to Galilee.” “Returned” translates *anechoresen*, meaning to *take refuge* or *withdraw*. But where would he go? Galilee was seventy miles long by forty miles wide. According to Josephus, the commanding general of the region in A.D. 66, it was “very thick” with cities and “very many villages.”³ Which would he choose?

**A strategic place**

Jesus had lived his entire life (except the time his family sought refuge in Egypt) as a resident of Nazareth, a small village in Galilee. In Jesus’ day, it likely housed no more than twenty families. It gave the Son of God a safe place to grow up far from the public...
Matthew 4:12-22. Called to Follow Jesus

eye, but its obscurity would now prove an obstacle to his Kingdom ministry: “Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali” (Matt. 4:13).

“Leaving” translates katalipon (to leave to one side or give up). He left his hometown, not just physically but permanently. “Went” renders erchomai (to come, go, make one’s way toward). “Lived” translates katokesen, meaning to come, make one’s way toward, settle down, choose to inhabit. Jesus closed the door to Nazareth as he chose to make his home in Capernaum. Why there?

Capernaum was the largest city in that part of Galilee. A major fishing and trading center on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, it would give Jesus access to the larger population of the region.

In addition, its residents would prove more receptive to his ministry than those in his hometown. Luke tells us that Jesus returned to Nazareth after his baptism and wilderness temptations, where he spoke from Isaiah 61:1-2 and claimed his Messianic office. However, the people of Nazareth rejected his message and tried to kill him (Luke 4:16-30).

As a result, “he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people” (Luke 4:31). They responded very differently from those in Nazareth: “They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority” (Luke 4:32).

A strategic prophecy
In addition to Capernaum’s cultural significance and receptive populace, its location proved strategic for a third reason as well: “to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Matt. 4:14-16).

“Fulfill” translates plerothe, meaning to complete, finish, fill up. This prophecy was given by God “through” Isaiah to the nation. It referred to the “land” or region of Zebulun and Naphtali (to be discussed below), located on “the way to the sea.” This is the road known as the Via Maris, one of the most significant highways in history. It runs from Egypt in the southwest along the Mediterranean before turning inland toward Damascus. Armies marched along its path across millennia; the main western highway connecting Judea and Galilee today retraces its route. Every time I lead a study tour of Israel, we travel along the modern version of this road for much of our time in Israel.

It parallels the “Jordan” river, running north and south, to “Galilee of the Gentiles.” This was the name of the region after the Assyrians destroyed the ten northern tribes and
repopulated the area with Gentiles (about 722 B.C.), setting the stage for Matthew’s narrative and its fulfillment of Isaiah’s Messianic prophecy.

This connection between Jesus’ ministry base and Isaiah’s prediction was extremely significant for Matthew’s purposes. Remember that he wrote his gospel to persuade Jews that Jesus was their Messiah. In Isaiah 9, the prophet promised, “there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan” (Isa. 9:1). What was their “distress”?

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the twelve tribes of Israel. During the conquest of Canaan, they were given land along the northeast border of the nation. Along with the rest of the ten northern tribes, they had been destroyed by Tiglath-Pileser III and his Assyrian armies. In this way God “humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali” for their sins.

However, the prophet foresaw a day when the Lord would “honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan.” Now seven centuries had passed, but the area was still more Gentile than Jewish, far from the temple in Jerusalem and the pious people who lived in its Judean precincts.

Jesus’ decision to base his ministry in this city and region fulfilled Isaiah’s promise. It was just one of many ways that our Lord fulfilled the Old Testament predictions regarding the coming of Messiah.

Because many who lived in the region were Gentiles, they were living in spiritual “darkness” (Matt. 4:16; skotos, meaning gloom, evil). But Jesus’ coming brought them a “great light” (mega phos, meaning large light, torch, lamp) as he was the “light of the world” (John 9:5). They had been living in the “land of the shadow of death” spiritually, but now “a light has dawned” (Matt. 4:16).

Jesus chose to live and work in Galilee, where he would be free from the intrusions of Herod Antipas. And he chose to base his ministry in Capernaum, where he could reach the larger population while serving a city that was receptive to his message and demonstrating his fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. Each of these decisions was strategic in its import and consequences.

Those who would continue Jesus’ ministry must seek to be just as strategic. Paul would base his Macedonian ministry in Philippi, for it was “a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia” (Acts 16:12). He spent more time in Ephesus and Corinth than anywhere else, as these were two of the largest cities in the ancient world. Peter centered his ministry in Rome, the capital of the ancient world, while the Apostle John served as pastor in Ephesus.
Martin Luther used the printing press, the Internet of his day, to advance the Reformation. C. S. Lewis used BBC radio during World War II to defend the gospel in Great Britain. Billy Graham used television to advance his evangelistic ministry around the world.

How would God use your spiritual gifts and cultural influence to advance his Kingdom today?

**Serve the Kingdom (4:17-22)**

Jesus’ ministry begun and his base established, “From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’” (Matt. 4:17). This message was given to Jesus by his Father: “I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it” (John 12:49).

“From that time” points to a change in Jesus’ strategy. “Preach” translates kerysso, meaning to proclaim, announce publicly. He called the people to “repent,” metanoeo, meaning a change of mind that results in a change of life. John the Baptist issued a similar call for life change (Matt. 3:1, 7-10), as did God through his prophets: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!” (Ezekiel 14:6). This statement is especially powerful:

O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live! (Ezek. 18:30-31).

Why must we “repent” today? Because “the kingdom of heaven is near.”

*What is the “kingdom of God”?*

The “kingdom of heaven” is found more than thirty times in Matthew’s Gospel, while he uses “kingdom of God” only five times (Matt. 6:33; 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43). The two phrases are synonymous; Jews often substituted heaven for God to avoid speaking the holy name of the Lord. When the prodigal confessed that he had sinned “against heaven,” he meant that he had sinned against God (Luke 15:18).

Jesus gave us the Kingdom’s most concise definition when he taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). God’s kingdom comes wherever his will is done.
Scripture consistently teaches that our God is a King:

- “The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity” (Psalm 93:1-2).
- “The LORD will reign for ever and ever” (Exodus 15:18).
- “The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever” (Ps. 29:10).
- “O LORD, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth” (2 Kings 19:15).
- “The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name” (Zechariah 14:9).

Jesus came to inaugurate his Father’s kingdom on earth. He spoke of the kingdom more than 100 times. He taught us to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). When he returns, he will consummate the kingdom as “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (Revelation 19:16). On that day “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

How do we serve the Kingdom?

By this point in his ministry, Jesus had called John, James, Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael (John 1:35-50). They accompanied him as he served in Cana (John 2:1-11) and Jerusalem (John 2:12-23), and ministered to Nicodemus (John 3:1-21). At this time, John the Baptist was still active in ministry (John 3:22-36); when Jesus became aware of the Pharisees’ resentment, “he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee” (John 4:3). Along the way he brought the Samaritan woman to faith (John 4:4-42).

By this time, John had been imprisoned, and Jesus chose to live in Capernaum. His disciples had served and traveled with him for more than a year, but they lived with their families and continued their professions. Now Jesus was ready to take the next step in his Kingdom plan and needed their full-time commitment to his cause: “As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen” (Matt. 4:18).

“Walking” should be rendered walking around. Jesus was walking along the coast of the Sea of Galilee when he saw Simon Peter and Andrew “casting a net into the lake.” Their net was known as the amphiblaistron. It was circular, with pellets of lead around its circumference and a rope tied to its center. When thrown into the water, it collapsed around whatever fish might be in its path; the fishermen would then draw it back into their boat.
When Jesus saw them he extended his invitation: “‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will make you fishers of men’” (Matt. 4:19). “Come” translates an imperative, come here. Verse 20 says they “followed him.” Jesus was asking them to become his formal disciples. In this way they would live with him, learn from him, and imitate his lifestyle and priorities.

While most students chose their teachers, Elijah had called Elisha (1 Kings 19:19-21) as Jesus now called his followers. He would later say, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last” (John 15:16).

Jesus called them to this purpose: “I will make you fishers of men.” “Fishers of men” was Jesus’ metaphor for describing his call to these professional fishermen. For centuries, Greek and Roman philosophers had used this phrase to describe a person who tries to catch others through persuasion. As these men had devoted their lives to catching fish, so they would now devote their lives to catching “men.”

How? With Jesus’ help: “I will make” means to call and equip for a specific purpose. His Spirit would gift them for their ministries (see Romans 12:4-8; Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Corinthians 12:28-31). He would direct them to those places where they were to serve (see Matt. 10:5-6), give them the message they were to share (10:7), show them the ways they were to minister (10:8), and provide for their needs (10:9-10).

Jesus warned us: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). As we “remain” in him by submission to the Spirit, Jesus gifts and calls us to be “fishers of men.” His will is “good, pleasing and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). He has a Kingdom assignment for each of us and is calling us to fulfill it today.

Jesus’ first disciples responded as we should: “At once they left their nets and followed him” (Matt. 5:20). “At once” translates eutheos, meaning immediately, without hesitation. “Left” translates aphiami, meaning to abandon and leave behind. “Left their nets” meant that they “left everything” (19:27), their homes, families, and livelihoods.

Jesus then called their fishing partners to join them: “Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets” (4:21). “Preparing” translates katartizo, meaning to mend, fix, adjust. When Jesus called them, “immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him” (4:22). They also left the “hired men” (Mark 1:20).

**How do we “fish for men”?**
In what ways do we “fish for men” when we advance God’s Kingdom?
We serve with hard work and courage. Fishermen must brave the elements and risk their lives. We choose to be innovative and creative, using whatever methods catch the “fish” we are called to reach. Paul could testify, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22). And we live and work in ways that attract rather than repel those we seek: “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30).

Our Lord’s example is our model in catching people for the Kingdom: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23). When we teach his people, announce his gospel to the community, and meet needs in his love, we continue his ministry today.

Then his Spirit will draw people to our service: “News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him” (4:24-25).

“Who were ill” translates the Greek for those who had it bad. Their doctors could not cure them, but Jesus could. In fact, he healed all who were “ill with various diseases,” as no problem is beyond Jesus’ compassion and power.

Others were “suffering severe pain.” “Suffering” means being pressured by; “severe pain” translates tortures, torments. Still others were “demon-possessed”; their healing showed that Jesus has power over spiritual illness as well as physical. “Those having seizures” is literally lunatics, those suffering from mental illness. “Paralyzed” refers to those whose physical handicaps were beyond medical cure. Matthew simply says that Jesus “healed them.”

Jesus later called his disciples to extend his healing ministry: “He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (Matt. 10:1). Jesus’ strategy for ministry then and now is simple: Teach believers, evangelize nonbelievers, and help hurting people. In what ways are you continuing Jesus’ Kingdom ministry?

**Conclusion**

There is no greater privilege than serving the King of Kings by inviting others to join his kingdom. Such service is Jesus’ definition of success and significance. How would he measure your life and work? How would those you influence today?
According to a story told about William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, a scene on a calendar depicts him out on a rough sea at night in a small lifeboat. As the waves rage, Booth is reaching out his hand to pull in a survivor who is lost at sea. A small vignette in the corner shows Booth’s granddaughter asking her grandmother, “Grandma, is granddaddy trying to save that man or only shaking hands with him?”

What would your friends say you’re doing for them?

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