“FROM NOW ON YOU WILL FISH FOR PEOPLE”

Luke 5:1–11

Key Verse: 5:10b

“Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.’”

In the previous passage we saw basically a day in the life of Jesus. How Jesus spent his day shows us his priorities. His first priority was sharing God’s word. Next was healing people. And through spending personal time with God first thing in the day, he renewed his sense of purpose and calling. He refused to settle down in one place. He knew he was sent by God to invite all people to come into God’s kingdom.

Now in today’s passage we see how Jesus invites Simon Peter and his partners to join him in this ministry. Luke’s account of this event is much deeper and richer than those in the other Gospels. Through this passage we can see what Jesus wanted his disciples to experience, before he personally called them. We especially see that from the beginning Jesus wanted people to join him in the ministry, and we can learn what it really means to be a follower of Jesus today. May God speak to our hearts personally through this study.

Read verse 1. This verse presents a beautiful picture of Jesus’ Galilean ministry. Jesus didn’t just teach on the Sabbath in synagogues. He would often teach at the shore of this lake. And many people would gather to listen. He wouldn’t just talk; he would speak to the people the word of God. His whole ministry hinged on this. Jesus planted God’s word like seed, because he believed that through God’s word people could come out of living under the devil’s influence and come into God’s kingdom (8:11). He expected people to take it so seriously that they would not only hear God’s word but also to start to put it into practice (8:21). In the book of Acts Luke often repeats how, through those who believed in Jesus, the word of God would spread (Ac6:7; 11:19; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20). Jesus’ ministry of speaking the word of God would continue through his followers, and this continues right to this very day. So following Jesus means listening to the word of God, and eventually, sharing it with others.

Read verses 2–3. Because the people were crowding him by the lake, Jesus needed a better position to speak to them. So he asked a favor of a fisherman there named Simon. We know that Jesus already had somewhat of a relationship with this man, because on a Sabbath, after teaching in the synagogue Jesus had gone to Simon’s home, healed his mother-in-law and had had a Sabbath meal there, and after sunset Jesus had healed many people there (4:38–40). After spending a day in Simon’s home, this time Jesus spends some time in Simon’s boat on the lake. It says here that Jesus asked him to “put out a little from shore” (3). Partly this was so that the crowd could hear him better, but also, it seems Jesus was hoping Simon himself also would be listening. Simon and his companions were busy nearby, washing their nets after fishing all night (2b,5). By asking a favor of Simon, Jesus was making a personal friendship with him. And though he was busy right now, and probably tired, Simon stopped what he was doing to help Jesus. In these details Luke is saying that making a decision to be a follower of Jesus starts out with listening to his words and helping in practical ways.

Then suddenly the story takes a dramatic turn. Read verse 4. Surprisingly, Jesus turns his attention away from sharing God’s word with the people, and now he wants to help Simon catch some fish. We’ll soon see what his purpose was. How did Simon respond? Read verse 5. This is amazing. We notice several things here. First of all, Simon calls Jesus “Master.” The Greek word, “Epistatace,” means “Overseer.” It was a term of respect for a person in authority watching over things. This respect is an essential element in being a follower of Jesus. Anyone who takes a careful look at Jesus will no doubt start giving him the utmost respect because of who he is and how he lived. But the Bible adds that this principle of respect applies to Christians in another way, too. Those who follow Jesus need to start living in a manner worthy of respect, so that others would start to follow Jesus through them (1Th4:12; 1Ti3:2,4,8,11; 6:1; Tit2:2).

Read verse 5 again. Another thing we notice here is that Simon was a hardworking man. He stayed up all night with his companions trying to catch fish, and then in the morning, they were washing their nets. These are the kinds of people Jesus wanted to follow him. It was because serving in ministry, spreading God’s word and the good news of his kingdom, involves not necessarily high intellect but a lot of hard work. People not willing to work hard won’t really do it.

And finally, we see in verse 5 Simon’s heart-moving words: “…but because you say so.” Simon’s respect for Jesus went above and beyond what he thought was reasonable, or how he felt at the moment. To him, as a fisherman, nighttime was the time for fishing, not morning. They were already washing their nets getting ready to go home. And they were really tired. But he put aside his own thinking and feelings, out of his deep respect for Jesus. He was able to think beyond himself and his own situation because he was paying attention to who Jesus really was. Jesus spoke the word of God with God’s authority. And Jesus could heal all kinds of sick people. So Simon was ready to follow what Jesus said, ahead of his own ideas. This is another essential trait in being a follower of Jesus. We human beings all tend to have our own ideas. In our culture we especially value people who are independent thinkers. It’s actually a really good trait—to think for oneself. But an even better trait is someone who learns to listen to Jesus ahead of his or her own ideas or strong feelings. Acting based on Jesus’ words themselves is the foundation in living a spiritual life. If we listen yet do not act based on his words, we find that we really have no foundation (6:48–48).

The drama continues. Read verses 6–7. This remarkable catch happened when they overcame themselves and obeyed Jesus’ instructions. This was what Jesus wanted them to experience. They learned many things from this. They learned that Jesus is Lord of nature, even of the fish in the sea. They learned that even when things seem impossible, we should obey Jesus. And they learned that Jesus can do way more that we could ever ask or imagine (Eph3:20). This is the essence of what faith is all about. Jesus wanted Simon and his companions to experience first-hand this power of faith.

Then there’s another unexpected turn of events. It’s Simon’s response to the great catch. Read verse 8. Most people would have reacted in the exact opposite way. They would think, “Wow, Jesus can solve all our problems! With Jesus we can make lots of money! With Jesus we can gain great success and all we want in life! We’ll live in abundance!” But Simon Peter didn’t think that way at all. Instead, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” We saw in the previous passage that Jesus is the Holy One of God (4:34). In the presence of this Jesus Simon Peter realized how unworthy he was. The point here is not that Simon Peter was rejecting Jesus’ calling. The point is that he wouldn’t be following Jesus based on his own ambition or worthiness. Actually, for all of us, following Jesus can be based only on his grace. In following him, Jesus wants us all to have the attitude of an unworthy servant (17:10).

Self-realization is really important. So the ancient Greeks came up with the famous saying, “Know yourself.” Socrates especially emphasized this. Self-awareness is the starting point of really knowing anything. So many people have so many problems but the real problem is that they don’t really know themselves. They try to find themselves in exploring their talents or comparing themselves with others. But Simon Peter came to truly know himself in the presence of Jesus. Likewise, when we come into the presence of Jesus, his light shows us who we really are (1Jn1:5–10). Realizing how sinful we are doesn’t lead to self-hatred or guilt trips. Instead, it gives us the proper humility to listen to Jesus, respond to his grace and live in real relationships with his people. Apostle Paul is a great example of this. When he was a self-righteous Pharisee, he thought he was serving God, but he didn’t really know himself or how harmful he was. But when he met Jesus personally, he discovered what a sinner he was and never forgot it. Even after years of successful and fruitful ministry he wrote in 1 Timothy 1:15: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst.” Before he met Christ, Augustine of Hippo had lived a very arrogant and immoral life. But he too realized the amazing grace of Jesus; his inner person was deeply changed, and he then had a tremendous influence in history. He became the champion of humility. He famously wrote: “Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering.” He also gave some deep and compelling advice: “Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility.”

Simon Peter, his companions, and James and John his fishing partners were astonished at the great catch of fish they had taken (9–10a). At this moment when Simon Peter said to Jesus, “Go away from me, Lord,” Jesus said just the opposite back to him, calling him instead to follow him. Read verse 10b. Jesus didn’t deny that Simon Peter was a sinful man. Instead, he first reassured him, “Don’t be afraid.” Afraid of what? Afraid of failure? Afraid of the world? Afraid of people? Maybe. But in this context, it seems first of all to mean afraid of God in a negative sense, afraid that as a sinful man God would punish him. But Jesus’ words “Don’t be afraid” mean he was giving Simon Peter his grace of forgiveness. Jesus wants to give each one of us this grace, too. His grace of forgiveness heals all our fears. We may not fully realize it, but Jesus knows how sinful we are. Still, he accepts us just as we are. He’s ready to forgive all our sins and draw us into a close, personal relationship with him, based not on our performance, but based on his grace. He’s inviting us to follow him in this grace and is saying to each of us, “Don’t be afraid.”

But Jesus was also calling Simon Peter to a new life mission. Read verse 10b again. Up to this point, Simon Peter had been fishing for fish. It had involved a lot of hard work, sleepless nights, and sometimes, empty hands. It was his way of life, all he knew. It represents, in a sense, all people’s struggle to survive in this world. At some point we all have to grow up, move away from mommy and daddy and start our own independent life, paying our own bills and making our own way. So many people make worrying about this their main objective in life. Everything is geared toward surviving and living well in this world. It seems smart. But in the end, it all seems rather meaningless. Is life really about struggling to make it in this world, only to die in the end anyway? Is it really about achieving some fleeting glory, or just enjoying the journey as much as we can along the way? It all seems kind of selfish and empty. The Apostle James said, “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (Jas4:14b). But when Jesus calls us to follow him, he calls us into a new life of real significance, a new life of fishing for people. What does it mean to “fish for people”? It means to do what Jesus did, reach out to all kinds of people disconnected from God and bring them back to him and to his kingdom. It’s the only life of real significance, a life that leaves a lasting impact and influence on people. So what are we really living and striving for? Today Jesus is calling us to follow him.

But how can we really “fish people”? If we try, most people don’t seem interested at all. We seem too inadequate and powerless. We can’t even get our own act together, so how can we possibly fish other people to bring them back to God and his kingdom? Simon Peter the fisherman had no intrinsic ability to do it, either. He knew he was nothing but a selfish, fearful, sinful man. But eventually, God would use him to fish many people. How did it happen? It was because he followed Jesus. Following Jesus would transform him. Following Jesus still transforms ordinary people into those who can fish many others for God’s kingdom.

How did he respond? Read verse 11. Simon’s deep respect for Jesus again translated into action and obedience. He and his companions made a clear and immediate decision. They didn’t calculate or hesitate. They made this commitment not to use Jesus for what *they* wanted, but to truly follow him for what *he* wanted. They were ready to let him transform them. It seems they realized living for fishing fish would be meaningless, but following Jesus would be so much better. Following Jesus still requires this kind of decision and commitment.

Today we learned that Jesus wants each of us to join him in his ministry. He’s calling us to follow him. And we learned what it really means to follow him. Following Jesus means to listen to his word. Following Jesus means to experience the power of faith by simply obeying his word. Following Jesus means to realize who we really are before God, and to accept his grace. Following Jesus means allowing him to change us. Following Jesus means to leave behind a selfish life of struggling to survive or make it in this world, and instead, to join him in a meaningful life of bringing people to God and to his kingdom. Following Jesus requires a clear decision and commitment. Let’s read verses 10b–11 again. Let’s pray.