

Were Jesus' First Disciples Called to Salvation or Discipleship?

"Then He said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.'" Matthew 4:19

Jesus' encounter with the fishermen at the Sea of Galilee is the first recorded meeting in Matthew and Mark of these men who became His first disciples (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20). Some readers assume that Jesus invites Andrew, Peter, James, and John to salvation. Their view requires that salvation is obtained by following Jesus, with the implication that every Christian must be a committed follower. In other words, there is no distinction between being a Christian and being a disciple. Is the call to follow a call to be saved?

The Purpose for Jesus' Invitation

The reason Jesus calls these fishermen to follow is clarified with his explanatory statement: "I will make you fishers of men." Jesus obviously speaks of the work of evangelism that leads others to eternal life. If Jesus is calling these fishermen to salvation, then the passage teaches we are saved by following Christ in such a way that we are leading others to salvation. This would be an odd condition for salvation—only soul winners would be saved! It could also cause many Christians to doubt their salvation if they haven't led anyone to Christ or are not active in evangelism. Salvation would be a process ("I will make you become fishers of men." Mark 1:17b), not an instant transaction.

The Timing of Jesus' Invitation

There is no reason to assume that this is Jesus' first encounter with Andrew, Peter, James, and John. On the contrary, John 1:35-42 is good evidence that Andrew and Peter, at least, had met Jesus earlier than the Sea of Galilee meeting, since John clearly records Peter's first introduction to the Lord. John records that Andrew and Peter met Jesus "beyond Jordan" where John the Baptist was baptizing, not at the Sea of Galilee (John 1:28, 43). In John's account, Peter is brought to Jesus, but in Matthew and Mark, Jesus comes to Peter. When we compare the setting and circumstances, we see a different encounter than that recorded by Matthew and Mark.

By the same measure, Luke 5:1-11 is also a different story from Matthew and Mark's account. Though the seaside setting and Jesus' promise that Peter will "catch men" (v. 10) make them sound similar, we find no crowd pressing Jesus; He is alone. He is also walking, not standing as in Matthew and Mark's account, and the fishermen are in the boat, not on shore washing their nets. Finally, it is said of the disciples that "they forsook all" (v. 11), whereas in Matthew and Mark's accounts they only forsook their nets, boats, and father. Luke also mentions the miraculous catch of fish, an event that is not mentioned and does not fit in Matthew and Mark's account. Since all these men were fishermen in Galilee, Jesus' homeland, they surely would have encountered Jesus and His teaching more than once.

The Meaning of Jesus' Invitation

By observing these details, we see that Jesus' call to "Follow Me" is to men who either already met Him and identified Him as the Messiah (as with Andrew and Peter in John 1:35-42—as a disciple of John the Baptist, Andrew certainly believed what John taught about the coming Messiah) or had at least known of Him (in the case of James and John). Since eternal life and salvation are not mentioned in the invitation, it is clear that

Jesus is inviting men who had already met and believed in Him to become His disciples. In the first century, to become a disciple meant to follow and learn from a teacher or teachers (for example, the Gospels mention disciples of Moses, disciples of the Pharisees, and disciples of John the Baptist. See John 9:28; Mark 2:18). For these fishermen, this means they have to commit to leaving their work, their source of income, and even their families, which they did. They need to reorient their purpose in life to match that of their Master, Jesus, which was to fish for men, or share His gospel. The call to discipleship is costly and invites believers to take up God's purpose for their lives. It involves a lifetime of growth and service based on commitment. Throughout His ministry, Jesus continually challenges his disciples to deeper commitments of following, even repeating the call to "follow" (See Luke 9:23; John 21:19, 22). Andrew, Peter, James, and John could believe in Jesus Christ and remain fishermen, or they could also commit to follow Jesus Christ's call to become fishers of men.

The Assumption of Jesus' Invitation

The invitation to become a disciple and follow Jesus as Master assumes that someone has already come to know Jesus as Savior. In salvation, a person comes to understand that Jesus saves from sin and gives eternal life as a free gift, but in discipleship, a person understands that he can respond to God's grace in salvation by devoting his life to following Jesus with a new purpose. Salvation is free, but discipleship is costly. To make conditions of discipleship (such as Luke 9:23; 14:26; John 8:31) conditions of salvation inserts commitment, obedience, and ultimately works in the gospel, which denies God's free grace. Theologically, we would say this confuses justification (salvation from the penalty of sin) with sanctification (salvation from the power of sin). All disciples are Christians, but not all Christians are necessarily disciples.

Conclusion

Jesus' encounter with the fishermen at the Sea of Galilee shows us that believers are called to become disciples. That is still God's desire for every believer. The distinction between the condition for salvation (faith) and the conditions for discipleship (following, etc.) is crucial in keeping the gospel free and clear of human merit. Accepting the invitation to discipleship gives every Christian a purpose in this world—we are to help others come to know Jesus Christ as Savior. For those who fear sharing their faith with others, there is comfort in Jesus' promise that *He will make us* fishers of men. It is *His* promise; all we have to do is follow!