

Jesus Calls & Commands

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Preacher: Elliott Lytle

[0 : 0 0] Well, all right. Good morning, everybody. My name is Elliot. So great to be with you today. I come a little bit humbled this morning. So in both services, yeah, God just kind of showed up a little bit during worship.

And when he does that, you really are just kind of step back and say, God, don't let me get in the way of anything your spirit is doing. Right. And so he's been here with us and I pray he'll continue to be here with us as we look at his word today.

So, again, so good to be with you. We're continuing our series in the Gospel of Mark today. And we're going to do that by looking at how Jesus calls his first disciples.

So when we say every week that one of the things we want to do as a church is make disciples, there's a really good reason for that. It's because it's exactly what Jesus told us to do.

But not only did he tell us to do it, you're going to see it is the pattern of his life throughout his ministry. He's going to be calling disciples. And at the very beginning of his public ministry, he calls disciples to himself.

[1 : 0 4] And from here on in the story of Mark, the disciples are a really big part of that story. It is truly a story of discipleship. And so we're going to look at two passages from Mark today that are going to be up on the screen that show us some snippets of some of the very first disciples he called.

One of them from Mark chapter 1 and one from Mark chapter 2. And we'll see what that tells us about what we can expect when Jesus calls to us. So with that, let's just kind of dive right into it.

In Mark chapter 1 here, it says this. Passing along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.

And Jesus said to them, Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men. And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little further, he saw James, the son of Zebedee, and John, his brother, who were in their boat mending nets.

And immediately he called to them. And they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and they followed him. And then over in chapter 2, Jesus, as he's going along, it says, He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them.

[2 : 1 5] And as he passed by, he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, Follow me. And he rose, and he followed him. So right out of the gate, one of the things we see about the way Jesus calls disciples, like the calling he gives them, is that the calling of Jesus is a command.

So all throughout the Gospels, all throughout the rest of the book of the Mark, one of the things you see about Jesus, and one of the things that just draws people to him, is that when he encounters people, they are seen with eyes of love that are never condemning for where they find themselves.

Eyes of love that never condemn them even for the choices they've made to bring themselves there. Like over and over, you see that kind of just compassion pouring out from him.

He never shows up to judge them. He never shows up to condemn them. But the other thing is he never leaves them. He's never content to leave them where he finds them.

He calls them into something else. And so one of the things you've got to understand kind of out of the gate is that discipleship and obedience are not given as something that's optional for a follower of Jesus.

[3 : 31] So I mean, just kind of think about it practically. When Jesus called to these first disciples and said, follow me, if they had said, no, we're not going to follow you, they would still very much be loved.

But they, by definition, wouldn't be disciples. Like they wouldn't be followers. They would have chosen not to follow. And so part of, if you want to know what being a disciple is, being a disciple means that you accept and you take on not just Jesus' friend, but Jesus' Lord.

Jesus actually says this kind of bluntly in Luke chapter 6 verse 46 in kind of this long series of teachings. He stops and he says to the people in the room, why do you call me Lord, Lord and not do what I tell you to?

And then he proceeds to tell this story about people that listen to him and put his words into action. That's like building your house on a really great foundation.

And if you hear my words and you don't put them into action, that's like building your house on sand, on something that's going to shift around. And like that right there is kind of giving the picture of a disciple is not just one who hears.

[4 : 38] It's not just one who sits under teaching. It's one who puts it into practice. That's what it means to be a disciple. Probably another thing that's worth noting here is we see from the way he calls these disciples that followers of Jesus can't wait for a convenient time to say yes, right?

So it's really tempting because we don't have all the details in the story to think that not much was going on in the life of disciples, right? Like they're just kind of hanging out, you know, fishing all day, not that much going on.

So yeah, yeah, I'll follow this Jesus guy. But they had all of us when Jesus come to us have responsibilities. We have obligations. We have things in our heart that we're tied to.

And the disciples were no different. It doesn't say it in this verses, but we find out in other places, the Bible, that Peter had a wife. He's also at this time got a sick mother-in-law whose Jesus later is going to heal.

But I'm sure that's weighing on his mind too. Like he has things just like we are that are like there are things he's thinking about and are taking up his mind and his time. But the thing that distinguishes them is that they still say yes.

[5 : 47] And it is fair to say they have no idea what they're saying yes to. Like there is no way they can understand the full scope of what they're signing up to.

But they put their yes on the table and that's what made them disciples. And so when we approach it, the thing you've got to understand is Jesus might not call you to leave a profession.

He might not call you to leave family behind. It might not look specifically like this, but his call is the same to you. Follow me. And if you want to be a disciple, you've got to follow him.

Okay? The next thing we see about this that's interesting is that we see Jesus calls the least expected. So we've touched on this some. When Jesus comes on the scene publicly, he's kind of hanging out in nowheresville.

Right? Like he's not in a prominent place. Jesse taught on this a few weeks back. He's from Nazareth. He's called Jesus the Nazarene. And that would not have been a compliment. Right?

[6 : 46] Like that would have been a point of derision to talk about how backwards somebody probably is because they're from a very unimportant place. Right? I mean, later, one of the people he calls, one of the disciples, someone comes and tells him, Hey, I think we found the Messiah.

And he's from Nazareth. And he's like, Can any Nazareth? Like, Does anything good come out of there? Like they just wasn't what they would expect. The other thing is when he starts ministering, so he's kind of hanging around the Sea of Galilee.

And that in and of itself might not be super surprising. Like the Sea of Galilee was an important, there were important activities that happened in that region. But what we don't see is Jesus, to our knowledge, never visits the most influential places.

So like on the Sea of Galilee, there were like prominent kind of Greco-Roman cities. Right? Like Sepphoris, Tiberias. It's like there are places where people with influence were.

And if you were aiming to be an influencer, that's where you would have gone. Right? But Jesus doesn't do that. He is hanging out in fishing villages. Right? Like he's hanging out in the wilderness and around the periphery.

[7 : 53] So there's nothing special about the places. He's not going to the places you'd expect people to be. And then the people he calls to himself don't look like the people you would expect.

So most of you probably know this. And we just read it. Peter, James, and John were fishermen. Right? And so there are plenty of people here in eastern North Carolina that can identify with that lifestyle.

Right? And it's probably an oversimplification to say they were uneducated and ignorant. And I think that's kind of like the truth is people that spend their life on the water, I'd wager they know a lot of things you don't know.

And I'd wager they have a lot of skills you don't have. So this isn't to say that they knew nothing. They were dumb individuals. What it is saying, though, is that it's probably fair to say they didn't have the types of skills that you would expect from somebody who you are calling to be fishers of men.

They didn't have those type of skill sets. And Jesus is not unaware of any of that. He's just looking for something different. And it's probably a good point to pause as we go through the rest of the sermon.

[9 : 01] That's a really good question to ask yourself. What is Jesus looking for then? What do I look for? Right? Like when you're trying to look for where God's at work, is it with the most skilled orators?

Is it with the people that have the most talent? Is it where it seems like the most people are flocking? Like is that how you can tell where Jesus is at? Or is he looking for something different?

I think even better here is the call of Levi. So Levi is also called Matthew. You'll see him called Matthew in the other gospels. And Levi is a tax collector. And what's interesting is we see in the text, when Jesus calls Levi, people have a much more visceral reaction to that than they do to him calling the fishermen.

It's a different thing. Whereas with the fishermen, there's kind of this thing that might be like, look at Jesus choosing the bumpkins, right? Like he's not choosing the people that know anything. But with Levi, there is genuine disgust and anger at it, right?

And you can see this in Mark chapter 2. It says this. So Levi, we saw, Jesus calls him, says, follow him. They go to a house and a bunch of like Levi's tax collector buddies show up, right?

[10:12] And they're there. And Jesus is with them. And it says, as he reclined at the table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

For there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, why does he eat with sinners and tax collectors?

So it's probably worth pausing here and noting that I don't think sort of cultural and time difference here makes it really hard, I think, for us to understand exactly what they were so mad about.

So let's see if we can get close to it. So when you hear the term tax collector, right, like when you hear it today and you think about whatever negative connotation you might put to it, I think most of what we get at looks something like overbearing bureaucrat, right?

So like annoyance, right? Like the person that's going to like look for everything down to the T, right? Like are you really going to come get that \$12 I made on Etsy or something like that, right?

[11:15] You know, just somebody that's inserting themselves in your life in a little too intrusive of a way, right? So something you might be annoyed about or something you might not like, but not something that you would have this kind of gut level reaction.

So he's a tax collector, but what he is in their context is a lot less like overbearing bureaucrat and a lot closer to Nazi collaborator in occupied France.

I mean, think about it. Like the Roman Empire is a violent, oppressive kingdom that has swept through that region and subjugated everybody to their will and now forces you to pay money to them, right?

And Levi is one of the people of his own people, right? Like one of your kin who has said, you know what? If you can't beat them, join them. And so he is willing for his own financial gain to sell out his own people.

And then you put on top of that, that tax collectors were in a prime position to extort people, to bully them, to like ask for even more taxes than the Romans would collect.

[12:24] And they frequently did that, right? So these are like people that are betraying their brothers and sisters. They're betraying their country to side with Rome for financial gain.

And so when they call out about Levi, like it's not the same call as the fishermen. It's like, Jesus, don't you know what they're doing to us?

And Jesus is not unaware of any of that. He's just looking for something different. I actually like the back end of this verse because it gives you a little picture of the heart into what Jesus is looking for, right?

So when they say, hey, why do they eat with tax collectors and sinners? And Jesus hears it in Mark chapter 2, 17. He says, and when Jesus heard it, he said to them, those who are well have no need of a physician but the sick.

I have not come to call the righteous but sinners. If you hadn't done a lot of time like sharing Jesus with people, like you might make the assumption that the hardest people to reach are the people in the most dire circumstances.

[13 : 38] So like maybe you think like if I go down to say the jail, that's where, you know, it's going to be the hardest because people have done some really bad things in there. But if you've ever actually gone and ministered to jail, you would discover they are very open to hearing about the gospel because they are very aware of their sinfulness.

A lot of the times, the people we think might be the closest are actually the farthest because you feel like you're pretty good. I'm a pretty good parent. I got a pretty good job.

I'm pretty nice to people. And a lot of times that can be the barrier that keeps you far away. Like the outward things, not necessarily what Jesus is looking for.

The Bible said God chooses the foolish things of this world and the weak things to make the wise things and the strong things look foolish.

He calls the least expected. Maybe one more word about this before we move on. So maybe you're sitting here thinking and kind of the biggest thing that bubbles up in your heart, like the thing that gets you the most is not, you know, the people that Jesus called and their defects.

[14 : 50] It's you kind of immediately go to your own defects, right? Like you start thinking about if Jesus is going to call me, I'm just not really sure, like I'm a candidate for God, like changing the world in the same way he did these people, right?

But I hope what you can see here is they're no different than you. And in truth, when you make that statement, like when you say God can't use me like that, you're actually saying a lot more about what you think about God than what you think about yourself.

Like you're assigning something to God about how he works instead of about yourself. So Jesus calls the least expected, and that includes us today. And then finally, the calling of Jesus trumps everything.

So a few years ago, ESPN did this documentary series called The Last Dance. And it was basically a sports documentary over a couple of episodes documenting the Chicago Bulls basketball dynasty during the 90s, right?

And if you're going to do a documentary on the Bulls, then the central figure in that is going to be Michael Jordan, right? Because he is the iconic figure at the center of that franchise.

[16 : 09] And so if you hang around like sports circles, any kind of sports circles, basketball included, there are always these endless debates about who's the greatest of all time, right? Like who's the GOAT? And everybody starts bringing out their stuff, right?

You know, it's like this many rings or this many points or like who could jump the high, you know, like all this kind of stuff they put out there. And certainly Jordan is always in that conversation. But what was interesting in watching this documentary, when they talked to people who actually played against Jordan, who were his peers, who were his teammates, who were the people who covered him in the press, the people who played against him, when they asked them why was Jordan the greatest, the thing that came up over and over was not, man, he could just run faster than everybody.

He could jump higher than everybody. Like he was an incredibly skilled athlete, but there are a ton of people in the NBA that are incredibly skilled athletes. It wasn't that he was the most skilled player.

Like he was incredibly skilled and he worked hard to like perfect his craft, but there are a ton of skilled players out there. Like that wasn't the thing. The thing that came up over and over, like why was Jordan just a little bit better?

And they said it was this, because Jordan had this unbelievable singular focus on winning. Like there was literally nothing he would do, not do to get himself to the place where he was going to beat you.

[17 : 36] Like however far you were going to go, he was going to go one mile farther because he was like obsessively, compulsively consumed with winning. He was always present on that.

And that was the separator. Like that's what made him the greatest. And that's what his competitors said. Now that kind of passion can certainly turn sour when it's for earthly things or worldly things, right?

And indeed, a lot of that series was them kind of teasing out how in pursuit of that greatness, Jordan was almost cruel to some of his teammates, right?

Like it kind of played around with like, is this pushing too far, you know, to get to winning? And that obviously can happen in our lives, right? Like a healthy passion for your career can easily turn into neglect for your family, right?

A passion for your family can easily turn into neglect for anything else and anything else God would want to put in your life, right? Any mission he would going to give you. But that being said, I do think it's helpful to realize when you are curious about why Jesus operates the way he does, why you see him doing things that don't seem to be what normal humans do.

[18 : 52] Part of that is because he's operating with that kind of singular focus, but not for something trivial like a basketball game. He's focused on the things that matter most.

He's focused on his father, his kingdom, what he's doing in the world, setting people free, defeating the darkness of the enemy. He's laser focused on that.

And when he encounters people, that's what he's leaning into. That like you feel that coming off of him. So there's a lot of places in scripture where Jesus says some things to some would-be followers that seem kind of insensitive.

And frankly, if you were trying to build a following, are not the kind of things you say to people when you're trying to get people to follow you, right? So one of the things he says is, in one place he says, anyone who puts their hand to the plow and then looks back is not worthy of this kingdom.

I mean, that's intense, right? Like you're starting the task, but if you glance back, he's like not worthy of it. Like that's Jesus. That's really intense, man. I don't know.

[19 : 57] There's another person. This one's kind of even more intense. He rolls up and he says, Jesus, I want to follow you, but first let me go bury my father. And he says, yeah, let the dead bury their own dead. Now, we could probably peel apart that cultural context.

It probably doesn't mean exactly what you think it means, but it is still a pretty stark statement. And what he's really saying, like if you look at how Jesus deals with people, the question behind the question, the thing he's always really asking is, are you all in or not?

Because I'm all in. I've found the thing. I know the thing. He didn't find it. He isn't. You know, I know the thing that is the most valuable, and that's what followers of me get into.

And you even see this in the manner in which he makes this call to his disciples. So this is a place where if you just read the text, it probably doesn't jump out to you.

So I'm going to give you a little academic background here to help. So there's a commentary by R.T. France on the Gospel of Mark, and I think he does a really good job kind of drawing this out. So thinking about those verses we read where Jesus calls his disciples, R.T. France says this, It is misleading, however, to express this relationship in terms of a rabbi and his disciples.

[21 : 18] Rabbis did not call their followers. Rather, the pupil adopted the teacher. So what they would have been used to in their Jewish cultural context was that if you wanted to follow a rabbi, you selected the one you wanted to follow, right?

Like you followed someone who exemplified something you wanted to do, and you took on the mantle to become a learner. But Jesus summons, with its expectation of radical renunciation, even of family ties, goes far beyond anything they would have been familiar with in normal society.

It marks him as a prophet rather than a rabbi. And so what's he trying to get at there? So here's probably a helpful picture from the past in biblical history to help you.

So if you flip the clock back a couple of hundred years from when Jesus is doing this, let's go back to like the time of when David is king of Israel and then his son Solomon, and after that everything kind of starts to fall apart, right?

And so into that moment, God sends a prophet named Elijah. And Elijah's life is wild. Like if you have not read 1 and 2 Kings, do yourself a favor and go read 1 and 2 Kings.

[22 : 31] You're going to come away like it's a crazy book. And some of the miracles that God does in that book are the most kind of spectacular looking things you can see, right?

And so Elijah is called in that period. And when he gets to the end of his life, God speaks to him about anointing a successor to him. And he tells him to go and anoint this man named Elisha.

And so he goes to Elisha, and when he finds him, Elisha is plowing a field. He's got his oxen, he's got his farm equipment, and he's plowing. And Elijah comes along, and he just throws his cloak over top of him, right?

Which is just a prophet's way of saying, you're up, you know? He throws it on him. And what's interesting, so he selects him. And what's interesting is, go read that and look at like the way Elisha and Elijah interact.

It kind of looks how Jesus interacts, right? Like Elijah does that, and like Elisha's like, can I go first? And Elijah's like, what are we doing? And he's like, I mean, I guess we're going, right? And so, but you see Elisha's intent in that what he actually does is he goes back, and he takes those oxen he had, and he slaughters them.

[23 : 42] And he takes the farm equipment, and he chops it up, and he makes a fire. And he cooks the oxen on the fire. He gives out a meal to everybody, and he says, I'm gone.

And he takes up that mantle, and he follows Elijah, and there's no going back. The call of Jesus always involves leaving something behind and becoming something different than you are.

Amen. The fishermen, like, we just think they just left their nets, but they left a community. Like they left, like some of your identity comes from your job, right?

They left that. Levi left a job and a financial income that he could never go back to. And without the shield of that financial income, what's he got?

Because everybody else hates him, right? He doesn't have that same community, so he's leaving behind the only thing he's got as well. But they made the choice. They made the choice to leave something behind.

[24 : 39] There's a scene depicted in the cinematic version of The Hobbit, so Tolkien's classic tale, The Hobbit, right?

Where the wizard Gandalf, you didn't know you were going to talk about a wizard in church today, but here we are. So the wizard Gandalf is trying to convince the hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, to join him on an adventure.

And he talks to him about how Bilbo spent too long sitting in his comfy armchair, enjoying the comforts of home. And he talks to him about how, like, real life, like the best stories are not in your books, man.

Like they're out your front door, and that's where you're going to find it. And during the course of that, he says to Bilbo, Man, I bet you'll have a tale or two to tell when you get back.

And then Bilbo asks him this question. He says, Can you promise me I will come back? And Gandalf says, No.

[25 : 44] And if you do, you will never be the same. You will be changed. The radical call of Jesus, like if you're unfamiliar with what's actually being asked of you, like if you've not been in the church, you think about what Christians do.

The call of Jesus is not primarily give away a little more money, stop lusting, be a little bit nicer to people, pray. Like that's not the primary calling.

The call of Jesus to follow him is exactly that. It is to forsake everything you know, to take up a cross and die to yourself, and to follow him to whatever end it leads to.

And that's why Jesus tells us you should count the cost. Like you should think about that. And I think if you take that question soberly, it engenders a question you should ask, which is simply this.

So why should I do it? That sounds really hard. That sounds like a radical rest of my life altering decision. Why should I do that? Because real life isn't found in your comfortable and controlled circumstances.

[27 : 03] It's not found in like whatever kind of carefully cultivated dreams we have for ourselves. It's out there. It's out there. It's out there where the poor and the powerless are.

It's out there where the lost and lonely are. It's out there where Jesus is pushing back darkness. And that's really his offer is you come out there where I'm at, and he promises you that whatever that leads to, he will never leave you, and he will never forsake you.

It will be the greatest adventure, and whatever end it leads to, he will be right beside you, he will give, the Father will give you his good grace every step of the way, along with his very spirit inside of you.

That's what he's calling us to. That's what the call of a disciple actually is. And when you get that, some of the things that Christians, some of the strange things that Christians say and do make a little more sense.

Like, have you ever thought about how strange some of the things we sing in our songs are, right? But when you understand that's the call, you really see both the weight and the blessing in it.

[28 : 14] And so we'll end with this, like this line from The Wonderful Cross. Oh, The Wonderful Cross, an instrument of death. The Wonderful Cross bids me come and die and find that I may truly live.

So the band comes up. If you're not a follower of Jesus, I would say to you, he is calling to you this morning, just like he did to those people so long ago.

Follow me. Follow me. So what will you do? You got a choice. Maybe you're already kind of thinking like, yeah, that seems really hard.

I'm not going to walk that path. You can, but in fairness, not following Jesus has a price to it as well. And some of you might already know, kind of in your heart, that there's a deadness, there's an emptiness to that path that doesn't get any better.

His call is to you to find real life in you. And you might have to leave something behind and you might have to change something, but you will find a life that you haven't found. If you want to do that, when we take communion, there's going to be a prayer on the screen behind me that you can pray.

[29 : 32] Or if you want to talk to somebody in person, there'll be people at the side of the stage. Take advantage of that. If you feel that in your heart, if you know the way you're walking now leads nowhere, Jesus is offering you, Jesus is calling to you a different path.

If you are a follower of Jesus, sober question time. Can you say to him, Lord, Lord, is he your Lord?

What is it that might be keeping you from putting your yes on the table? I mean, maybe there's something even in your heart right now where like you're kind of starting to know, like I got to let it go. Like I got to leave it behind.

And you're scared about what that's going to look like. But the good news is, we're God's children. And he knows where we're at. Like you can come to him and say, God, I want to do this.

I'm not sure I can. Like I don't know how to let go of the thing. Or I don't know how to say yes. I don't know how to sell out to you. I feel exhausted all the time. I don't even know how to have the, like bring that to him.

[30 : 34] Bring that to him. You can do that where you're at. You can pray with people again on the side of the stage. Sometimes a step of faith out to tell it to somebody is kind of the thing you need to like signal, I'm actually letting this go.

Don't be afraid to do that. Jesus will, he'll be here as long as we need to be here. Do that with him.