

Bible commentary Week 9

Matthew 4:18–22; 9:9–13; 10:2–16

Four men say “yes” to a call

When Jesus heard of John’s arrest, the man from Nazareth left his hometown. Drawing on words from Isaiah, Matthew sees Jesus’ move from Nazareth to Capernaum as a fulfillment of prophecy. After making his home in the seaside village, Jesus began his preaching mission. His message was an echo of John’s words: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.”

Many children of a past generation learned what the Gospel tells us comes next by singing the words Jesus told to four men who fished in the Sea of Galilee: “I will make you fishers of men if you follow me.” Three of these four—Peter, James, and John—will figure prominently in the remainder of the Gospel. Only they, among all the disciples, will accompany Jesus to a high mountain where he will be “transfigured.” Peter will be the disciple who identifies Jesus as Messiah.

Rabbis in Jesus’ day often had followers or disciples. The custom was for students to choose a rabbi they wished to be their teacher. Here, however, Jesus does the choosing. He does not select young men from prominent families who desire to be taught, nor does his summons promise a study of the holy books. Instead the call comes to working men to change vocations. Following Jesus will mean that they will be fishing for people.

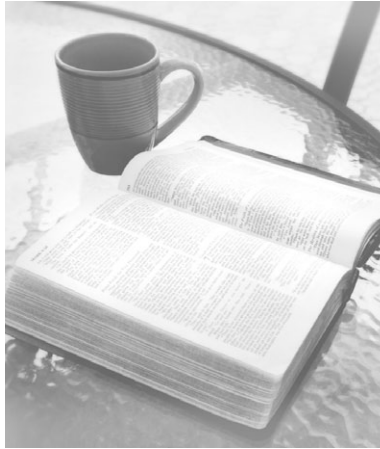
Like Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John respond decisively to Jesus’ call, and immediately put aside their work to follow him. The Gospel leaves us to speculate about why their decision was made so quickly.

Jesus calls a tax collector

The Gospel next gives a summary report of Jesus’ preaching and healing throughout Galilee. Chapters 5 through 7 contain a summary of teaching and chapters 8 and 9 give instances of his ministry of healing. Only then do we learn about the calling of another disciple.

In this case, the occupation of the disciple is of particular interest: Matthew is a tax collector. Modern readers can easily miss the then nearly unthinkable action of a rabbi choosing someone engaged in tax collection to be his disciple. Tax collectors extracted tribute on behalf of the hated Roman occupiers. After turning over the necessary proceeds to their superiors, they supported themselves by keeping an often excessive cut for themselves. They were despised as collaborators.

The invitation Jesus gives, though possibly done in private, becomes a public spectacle when it turns into a dinner engagement attended by “tax collectors and sinners.” Later



in the Gospel, Jesus will speak of “the tax collectors and the prostitutes.”¹ The writer of this Gospel wanted his readers to understand that Jesus saw his mission included reaching out to the ones regarded in his day as contemptible. His words in verse 13 make his purpose unmistakable: “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Instructions for disciples

The opening verses of chapter 10 list what the Gospel calls “the twelve apostles.” The term apostle appears only once in Matthew. (By contrast the word disciple appears more than seventy times.) Paul, who called himself an apostle, used the term to refer to those who had actually seen the risen Christ.² Here the usage specifies twelve men Jesus sends out to “proclaim the good news”, that is, to share the same message he is preaching. Like him, they are to heal the sick and cast out demons. Their task will not be an easy one; they will be like sheep among wolves. Following Jesus, as this Gospel makes clear again and again, is not for the faint of heart.

—Ken Gible, writer, teacher, and retired Church of the Brethren pastor, Greencastle, Pennsylvania.

1. Matthew 21:31.
2. 1 Corinthians 9:1.

Reflect

1. Read through the list of disciples. What do you suppose they had in common? What do you have in common with people from your church or small group?
2. Put yourself in the place of the disciples. How would it have felt to be called to cure the sick and spread the good news?
3. What does it mean to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves?
4. The commentary says that following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. What does God expect of those who choose to follow today?