

# sunday school lesson

# ADULT

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### Bible Story:

Jesus Calls the Disciples (Matthew 4:18-22)

### Central Bible Truth:

Jesus takes the initiative to call disciples and to give them a task to do for the Kingdom of God.

### Bible Background

Early in his ministry, not long after his baptism by John in the Jordan and his temptation by the devil in the wilderness, Jesus began to seek out twelve men who would become his closest followers, men whom we usually call "disciples." While Jesus had other followers, both male and female, during his lifetime, these twelve men were central figures in his ministry and many of them became important leaders of the early church after Jesus was gone. In Matthew's Gospel, these twelve disciples are symbolic representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel, and thus of the Church as the New Israel.

The focal passage for this lesson is Matthew's account of Jesus' call of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. The other three Gospels also contain similar accounts of Jesus' call of his first disciples (cf. Mark 1:16-20, Luke 5:1-11, John 1:35-51), but each of these passages differs slightly in its details. Try to avoid the distraction of getting bogged down trying to synthesize the various stories and instead help the class to focus on Matthew's account.

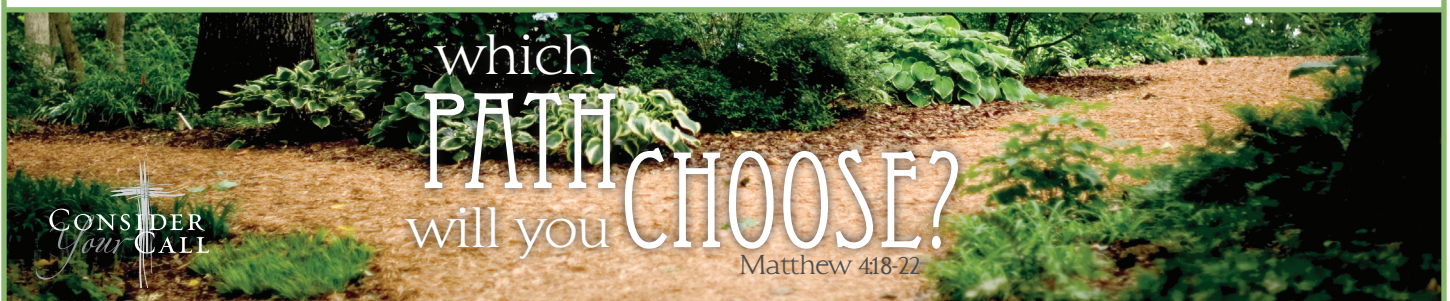
### 4:18

After John the Baptist's arrest, Jesus withdrew to Galilee, the region where he would concentrate his work (Mt. 4:12). When he began his public ministry, he did not travel to the Temple in Jerusalem to seek disciples from among the religious elite. Instead, "he walked by the Sea of Galilee" and called four local fishermen to follow him. More than likely they were from the middle class, such as it was in the ancient world, owning their own boats and possibly employing day laborers. So far as we know, there was nothing special about these men that warranted their being chosen by Jesus.

### 4:19

When Jesus approaches Peter and Andrew, he doesn't ask them: "Do you want to be my disciples?" Nor does he try to recruit them with a mere statement of fact: "I'm looking for a few good men." Rather, he issues a command: "Follow me." (The verb is in the imperative mood, not the indicative.)

Attached to Jesus' command ("follow me") is a promise: "I will make you fish for people." Jesus does not elaborate on what he means, yet implicit in this statement is the promise to equip his followers for the task. The disciples take nothing with them as they follow Jesus, abandoning their boats and nets in anticipation of receiving the necessary tools for their new work of "fishing for people."



By taking the initiative to call followers, Jesus inverts the practice of traditional Jewish rabbis, who did not seek disciples but rather were sought by them.

#### 4:20

If Matthew knew of any prior interaction between Jesus and any of these men, he does not consider it important enough to relate. In this passage, Jesus appears suddenly, as if a stranger, interrupts their work, and confronts them with a life-changing decision. "Like the call of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, [Jesus' call] is intrusive and disruptive, calling them away from work and family" [Boring, p. 171].

Nor does Matthew tell us what motivated Peter and Andrew to leave their nets and follow Jesus "immediately" – without hesitation, without preparation, without question, without comment, without excuse.

#### 4:21-22

The call of James and John mirrors that of Peter and Andrew in many respects. Jesus approaches, sees, calls. They are mending nets, whereas the other pair is casting, but this seems to be an insignificant detail. Perhaps a bit more important is the presence of their father, Zebedee. For James and John, the call to follow Jesus is not only a call to abandon livelihood, but also family. They too are called suddenly and respond immediately.

Note that the call of Matthew (Mt. 9:9) follows an identical pattern: as Jesus walks nearby, he sees Matthew engaged in his work as a tax collector and issues the command, "Follow me." And Matthew got up and followed him (the immediacy of the response is implied here, even though the word "immediately" isn't used explicitly in this verse).

### Key Themes

Matthew's account of the call of Peter, Andrew, James, and John offers us an answer to the question, "What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?"

#### 1. Jesus calls disciples.

In this passage, the focus is not on the four disciples, but rather on Jesus and the power of his call, which precedes any response on our part. "We are met here with Jesus' first miracle, the miracle of his powerful word that creates following – that makes disciples" [Boring, p. 169]. To be a disciple is to be confronted by the call of God and to respond.

#### 2. Disciples respond to Jesus' call.

Although Jesus does not compel anyone to obey his command to follow, his call does demand a response – indeed, an immediate response – whether we choose to follow or to linger behind. And when we choose to become a disciple of Jesus, that choice always involves renunciation. Not everyone is specifically required to renounce work and family. But to be a disciple is to be willing to leave behind whatever may hinder our ability to do the Kingdom work to which God is calling us.

#### 3. Disciples are given a task to do for the Kingdom of God.

The metaphor of "fishing for people" relates to bringing people into God's Kingdom (cf. Mt. 13:47-50). The specific tasks of fishing to which God calls each disciple may differ in their details, but they are all Kingdom tasks. As disciples, we must claim the promise that the God who commands us to follow him will make us fish for people. To be a disciple is to accept a Kingdom task, trusting God to provide whatever is necessary for the work that lies ahead.

Albert Schweitzer ends his famous book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* with the following observation about what it means for Jesus to call us as disciples in our day:

[Jesus] comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow me!" and he sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is. [Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1968, p. 403.]

### Introduction (5 minutes)

The God of the Bible is a God who calls. To begin the lesson, have the class make a list of as many biblical stories of God calling someone as they can remember. Try to coach them to include stories from both the Old and New Testaments. If possible, write the list on a white board or butcher paper where it will be visible to the class.

Tell the class that today's focal passage is a story about Jesus calling disciples. Point out that it occurs at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and that we are going to focus on Matthew's account.

### Read the Text (5 minutes)

Read Matthew 4:18-22.

Ask the class to count the number of action verbs in this passage. Emphasize that Matthew focuses on what the individuals were doing and does not tell us any of the details that we would like to know about what they were thinking or feeling. In fact, Peter, Andrew, James, and John do not say a single word.

### Engaging the Text (15-20 minutes)

It may be easy for many of us to place ourselves in the biblical story – watching, listening, casting/mending. But if we are going to respond to Jesus' call to follow as these first disciples did, it is natural for us to raise questions which they did not.

Use the following questions to help class members engage the biblical text. Depending on the size of the class, you may pose the questions to the entire class for discussion, or you may want to divide a larger class into small groups to discuss them. Remind the class that these are discussion questions that are not addressed directly in this passage.

1. How does this story of Jesus calling these four followers compare and contrast with the list of biblical call stories that the class made a few minutes ago?
2. Why do you think Jesus called these particular men?
3. Jesus calls two sets of brothers. Do you think that this is significant? Why or why not?
4. When he calls Peter and Andrew to follow him, Jesus promises, "I will make you fish for people." What do you think the phrase "fish for people" means? In this context, what does the verb "make" mean?
5. Why do you think these four men decided to follow Jesus? Do you think that it is important whether they had met Jesus before or not?
6. Do you think that Peter, Andrew, James, or John ever regretted the decision to follow Jesus? Why or why not?
7. Imagine that you are Zebedee. How would you respond to your sons' decision to leave the family fishing business and become disciples of an itinerant rabbi (teacher)?
8. Imagine that you are Andrew. What are the first questions that you would ask Jesus as you walk away from the Sea of Galilee with him?

### Applying the Text (15-20 minutes)

Class members may relate to this passage on at least two levels. At the most basic level, the call of Peter, Andrew, James, and John echoes the call that Jesus extends to all people to follow him. Some class members, perhaps most, may already have responded to this call "to give their lives to Christ" – to become Christians/Christ-followers. If so, then these individuals will be able to reflect on how they responded (in the past) to this call of God.

At another level, the four fishermen whom Jesus called by the Sea of Galilee became leaders in the church after his death, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus called them to leadership in ministry. Some class members may be wrestling with God's call to specific missions or ministries, whether these individuals ultimately become lay leaders or ordained clergy.

The following discussion questions may help class members reflect on how they responded to God's call in the past, as well as explore how they might respond to God's call in the future in light of this passage.

1. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?
2. How do people become disciples of Jesus?
3. How did you become a follower of Christ?
4. How did you first hear the call to discipleship?
5. How much did you know about Jesus at that time?
6. How did you respond? Why did you respond as you did?
7. Why might Jesus call you to a specific ministry? What do you have to offer to the work of the Kingdom?
8. What might you need to leave behind to follow Jesus more closely?
9. How much do you need to know about the work that Jesus is calling you to do before you might be willing to respond to the call?
10. What do you think of Albert Schweitzer's observation about discipleship? What are the tasks that Jesus "has to fulfill for our time"? How does Jesus "reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which [we] pass through in his fellowship"?

### Case Studies (10-15 minutes)

If time allows, or if the class prefers, you may want to discuss one or more of the following case studies.

#### Adult 1

You and four close friends from church meet every Thursday morning before work for Bible study and prayer. Last week, the group started studying the opening chapters of Matthew. Then on Sunday the pastor preached a sermon about listening for God's call. Later that day, one of your friends in the group phoned you and wanted to talk. This friend is absolutely convinced that God is calling him/her to follow more closely, but has no idea exactly what this means, saying: "How can I follow Jesus when I don't know what he wants me to do?" What would you say to your friend? Who else might you both talk with to help your friend discern God's call?

#### Adult 2

You are sitting in the waiting room at the dentist's office, and the dentist, who is a fellow church member, is running about 20-30 minutes behind schedule. After glancing impatiently at a magazine, you pick up a nearby Bible, open to the beginning of the New Testament, and start skimming through Matthew. A few minutes later, a woman next to you asks: "Good story?" You nod politely. "What's it about?" she asks. "Uh...it's about Jesus calling his disciples," you mutter in response. She replies: "Weren't they those 12 guys who traveled around with him?" Again you nod. "I've heard Christians say that they're Jesus' disciples too – never understood what they meant by that," the woman comments. How would you explain to her what it means to be a disciple of Christ today in language that she can understand? How might she interpret phrases like "Jesus called me" or "I'm a follower of Christ"?

#### Young Adult

You are a young, unmarried adult who is working as a physician's assistant in a local family practice. Your mother has recently been diagnosed with breast cancer, and her long-term prognosis is not yet clear. Your father owns a restaurant and is having a difficult time managing the responsibilities of running the business while caring for your mother as she undergoes chemotherapy. You have been sensing a call to return to India to work in a clinic where you served as a summer missionary a few years ago when you were in college. Your parents, who are not Christians, cannot understand how you would even consider "giving up a decent salary to go playing around overseas, especially at a time like this." How will you decide how to balance your sense of call with your parents' concerns? Who can you talk with to help you make this decision?

### Senior Adult

You and your high school sweetheart have been married for 47 years. Both of you have lived in Virginia all of your life, and you both taught for many years at the high school from which you graduated. Since retiring a few years ago, you have had much more free time to visit your children and grandchildren, who live on the West Coast. For many years, you have always given family and work first priority, but recently you and your spouse have been wrestling with God's call to lead a major new ministry at your church. Your children are opposed to it, saying that you shouldn't take on such heavy responsibilities at your age. But you suspect that the real reason for their opposition is that they know that you will not be able to travel as frequently, and they do not want to have to come to the East Coast to visit you. How will you decide how to balance your sense of call with your children's concerns? Is it ever too late to respond to God's call? Who can you talk with to help you make this decision?

### The Closing Prayer

Close with prayer asking for each student to be open to hearing God's voice in their lives and to having the courage to follow God's calling, wherever it may lead.

### Resources for Further Study

The following commentaries, which the author consulted in preparing this lesson, may provide a starting point for further in-depth study of this passage:

Albright, W.F. and C.S. Mann. *Matthew*. Anchor Bible, vol. 26. NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1971.

Boring, M. Eugene. *Matthew*. New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 8. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.

Hagner, Donald A. *Matthew 1-13*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33A. Dallas: Word Books, 1993.

Stagg, Frank. *Matthew*. Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 8. Nashville, Broadman Press, 1969.