

An Invitation to Christian Discipleship
Matthew 4:18-22

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Day by day they arrive in the mail. We call them invitations. A new store is opening for business and you are invited to see. A friend is getting married and you are invited to share in the celebration. Your class is having a reunion and you are invited to attend. Hardly a day passes, but someone requests the honor of your presence.

There is an invitation of a divine kind that cuts through history and transcends time. It comes from Jesus Christ. It has your name on it. It is an invitation to Christian Discipleship. Jesus of Nazareth requests the honor of your presence. The risen Christ invites you to a personal, daily relationship with him. A faithful friend, Jesus, asks you today, "Will you follow me? Will you go with me all the way?"

By the waters of baptism we are cleansed and claimed as children of God. By the rivers of life we are called and challenged to follow Jesus—to go with him all the way. Jesus is calling for you today to:

COME AND SEE. Check out the scene.

About once a year I go shopping. Usually around December 25, I go to buy a Christmas gift for my wife. I shop so seldom I feel odd in a store, especially in the women's clothing section. I usually go early in the morning when there won't be a crowd. As I walk down the aisle, I check out the scene hoping no other people will notice me. Inevitably there is a kind and thoughtful store clerk who will see my sense of desperation. She will come over and in a pleasant voice ask, "What are you looking for? How may I help you?"

When Jesus was the new prophet on the block, he started hanging out with John the Baptist down by the Jordan River. One day some of John's disciples were following Jesus from afar. They were curious about this new guy who had come on the scene. As they followed him from a distance, Jesus turned to them and said, "What are you looking for? How may I help you?" That day, two people went home with Jesus to discover a new way of life. You can read about in John, Chapter 1.

Some of you feel just about as uncomfortable in church as I do in a women's clothing store. You are a little shaky in this room. You do not know the songs, you are not familiar with the prayers, and you wonder why the people up front wear weird clothes every Sunday called *robes*. Yet, something inside you is longing for someone outside of you to show you the real meaning of life. Jesus is saying to you, "**Come and see.**" Check out the scene. Survey the territory. Take

your time. Ponder the possibilities. Live with the reality. Give it a try. Follow your heart. It might mean more than you can imagine. I say to you who are faraway, "Come, today. Come and see."

To others of you who are here to day, it is time to RISE AND FOLLOW. Take a step into the River of Life.

I will never forget it as long as I live. The sun was breaking the eastern sky as I stood on a boat sailing from Tiberius on a ride across to the northern shore of Galilee in modern Israel. Not far from the shore, there were fishermen casting their nets in the water, making a living from the catch of the day. As the morning mist moistened my face, it came to me, "Oh, my! This is how it first happened!" Just ordinary fishermen one day were tending their nets in this very spot. "And Jesus said, come follow me, and they left their nets and followed him."

Come. Follow. Was there ever an invitation more profoundly simple and simply profound? Come. Follow. To follow is to go, to move, to come after, to comprehend, to conform, to comply, to pattern, to penetrate, to pursue that calling that is bigger than I. Immediately they follow. I would have asked, "How far? How long? How much? What is the salary? What are the benefits?" They just start walking.

If somebody came and asked you today, "Are you a Christian?" you would most likely say, "Yes." By choice or by chance you are Christian as opposed to being a Muslim, Hindu, or Jew. You were born that way or maybe you made a passing decision one day to be a part of a Christian faith. But, if I asked you a different question, it becomes intensely personal, "Are you a disciple of Jesus Christ?" Where he leads will you follow? Will you go with him all the way? It is that personal relationship that Jesus sought with those fishermen that day. Salvation is a free gift, but discipleship is a dynamite decision. The turning point in any life is when we stop inventing the God we want and start following the God who is. To somebody today, the Savior is saying, "Come. Come follow me."

To somebody else this morning he is saying, PUSH OUT INTO THE DEEP. Dive deeper.

On the agenda this afternoon at our annual church picnic is a hymn-sing of old gospel songs. One my father-in-law and mother-in-law used to sing went something like this:

*Deeper, deeper in the love of Jesus,
Daily let me grow,
Till my life is wholly lost in Jesus,
And his grace I know.
O deeper yet I pray, and higher every day,
And wiser blessed Lord, in his precious holy word.*

Peter and his buddies had fished all night and had caught nothing. You can read

about it in Luke, Chapter 5. Whether or not you have ever wet a line in the water, you know that feeling of failure. You try, but you miss the mark. Elisha Otis invented the elevator, but first he failed three times as a mechanic. Ernest Hemingway wrote The Old Man and the Sea. First he got forty-six rejection slips from his publisher. Fred Astaire's first screen test was evaluated this way: "Can't sing, can't act, can dance a little." You know what it is, the taste of failure.

The joggers come along the Sea of Galilee at sunrise. There was Peter and his buddies washing their nets. They did not say, "O what a beautiful morning! Make it a good day!" They asked what all people ask fishermen, "Catch anything?" and Peter hadn't caught a single one. As he mumbles in response while tending to his nets and adjusting his oar, there comes another by that day who doesn't condemn him for failure, but rather says to him, "Push out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." That day they learned to fish in a new place, in a new way, in a new kind of power.

My friends, if you are here today feeling futile with your faith, if you have tried and failed at it, if you have become bored with church and wonder when it is going to be over, if you find yourself pushing to the edge toward the exit, there is one who is coming to you today who is greater than I and he says, "Push out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch. There is better fishing out here yet."

Dig into The Book. Learn to pray. Discover your spiritual gifts. Take on some ministry that is bigger than you, that you can't possibly do unless God does it. That is the kind of faith we need. Push out into the deep and let down your nets. Dive in deeper.

To somebody else Jesus says, Let's GO FOR A GREAT ADVENTURE. It is time to ride the rapids.

I don't remember exactly when it happened in the tides of time, but the Lord came to me one day and said, "Howard, it's time to quit paddling in the pond. Come with me to ride the rapids." To say that I was scared is more than you can imagine. I liked it beside the still water. Yet the call was persistent and profound. Reluctantly I followed.

"Is the river deep?" I asked my divine Guide. "Are the rapids rough?" You see, I am fundamentally afraid of water. I like to be in control. Meanwhile, my Guide smiled and said, "Trust me, Howard," as we pushed out into the stream.

For awhile the ride was absolutely wonderful. I could not have asked for anything better. Floating down the river on a sunny afternoon, the fish were flopping, the birds were singing, the flowers were blooming along the bank, and the trees made a canopy from the hot sun. I was beginning to enjoy the ride. Then suddenly, we began to pick up speed. The rocks started pounding against my feet. As I was tossed about with many conflicts and tremendous doubts, I looked over to him and asked, "Are we going to make it? I'm scared I'm going to

drown.” But he replied, “Trust me. When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you go through the flames, they will not hurt you for I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel. Be not afraid.”

I learned something that day that I will take with me into eternity. I learned that if you are going to ride the rapids, you have got to go with the flow. If you are going to know the fullness of God’s goodness and grace to you, you have to turn loose of control and let the river take you wherever it is that God is guiding you. The rapids have taken me places I could not imagine back in the pond. Oh yes, I have fallen out of the boat more times than once, yet the mighty hand of God has reached down into the depths and pulled me back in. I have been in over my head almost all my life, but the loving One, the kind and gentle Savior, has always picked me up and helped me go. Jesus of Nazareth requests the honor of your discipleship today. Jesus said, “If anyone would be my disciple, let them deny themselves, take up a cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Jesus calls.

To some Jesus says, GO AND TELL OTHERS. Go fishing. I will make you fishers of persons, says the Text.

As seven of us stood here the other day supervising a change of bulbs in the chancel spotlights, I could not help but ask the question, “How many Methodists does it take to change a light bulb?” Somebody replied, “Who said anything about change?” Of course there is a more crucial question. “How many Methodists does it take to make a new Christian?” I do not know the national figures, but at Brentwood last year it took forty-four of us. Jesus calls us into the people fishing business.

My father-in-law, who loved to fish, taught me a few things about fishing. If you are going to go fishing, it is best to go where the fish are. One of the problems you and I have with people outside the church is we don’t associate with them very much. Who in your circle of friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbors, and classmates knows not God and has no church? If you want to fish, go where the fish are. Get out of the church and go to the real world. Let us never be in a circle where there are only Christians.

To be fishers of people, we must use the right bait. The right word, at the right time, in the right way, to the right person, for the right reason, has powerful results. “What did you do this weekend?” “I took care of sixty kids; I help in our church nursery on Sunday morning.” “How’s it going for you?” “Financially ok, the family is doing pretty good, and spiritually, it’s the best time in my life.” That is a faithful witness. “So you’re new in town. I’m glad you are here. Have you found a place to shop? Have you found a place to get your hair cut? By the way, I go to church at this place. I’d love to pick you up on Sunday morning and you come along with me.” To a troubled friend we might say, “I know things are tough right now. When I have walked through the valley, the strength of God has sustained me and helped me there.” The right word, at the right time, for the

right reason, in the right way, to the right person creates a wonderful follower of Jesus Christ.

If you want to go fishing, you must be willing to wait. In God's time, he makes all things beautiful in his time. Don't catch to kill, net to release. We do not want trophies on the wall, but partners in the pool who are determined to pursue the will of God. Jesus of Nazareth invites you to be a faithful disciple today.

When he calls you, arise and follow fast. His way may lead through darkness, but it comes to light at last.

Amen.

