

“The Sociopolitical Significance of Galilean Fishing Economics”

Reading: *Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Jesus calling Peter and Andrew to follow Him and become “fishers of people” is a story that is classic and memorable enough that we’ve made children’s Sunday school songs out of it. But to truly understand what Jesus meant by those words we need to dig much deeper. To truly understand the impact of following Jesus we need to dive into an exploration of the larger picture. We can’t understand what it meant for Peter and Andrew unless we first understand what they were leaving behind, so we need to understand how the fishing economy worked in Galilee in the first century. We need to understand how fishermen fit into the economy of the Roman Empire, how the system of taxation worked between the local authorities, the regional kings, and the Roman emperor, how peasant family businesses operated in Galilee, what the expectations were for sons who ran those businesses, how the fishing industry distributed its products throughout the empire, and it wouldn’t hurt to even take a look at some of the recipes for Roman fish sauce. To that end, I have some slides to help us gain a better understanding of following Jesus and being fishers of people: we need look at a map of first-century Galilee, of course, and we need to understand a flowchart showing the relationship between peasant workers, taxation officials, and royalty in Rome, and we need to study a table showing the tax incomes of the various Herodian client kings, and here’s a recipe for how to make fish sauce for good measure.

Obviously we need all of that and more to understand what it meant to follow Jesus for Peter and Andrew, right? No. Obviously we don’t. You don’t really need to know the sociopolitical significance of Galilean fishing economics, or whatever other mumbo jumbo I named this sermon. Sometimes we overcomplicate the act of commitment as a defense mechanism against having to actually make the commitment. Sometimes we delay the act of commitment by insisting on understanding first, when in reality we are not called to understand *what* we’re committing to because we’re called to commit to a *person*. There’s certainly value in studying and learning all you can about the cultural context of the Bible; it’s a mistake to assume that you can simply read and understand everything in a book written thousands of years ago in another language in a land and culture halfway around the world. I did actually read an article for this sermon titled “The Galilean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition,” and I loved every word of it. We need to be as informed as we can. But do we need to know all of that to have some sense of what it would mean for Peter and Andrew to simply drop their nets, leave behind their work and their friends and their family, and follow an itinerant preacher? No, sometimes a children’s Sunday school song is enough. It’s clear enough to all of us the depth of commitment required.

It’s clear enough to me because if I’m honest with myself, I know I would have a hard time doing what they did. I would have a hard time with that kind of commitment even knowing what I know about Jesus. I know the story, I know how it ends, I know what He’s able to do, and still if He commanded me today to that level of commitment I’d probably have to think about it. I’m pretty confident I’m not alone in that. But these first followers of Jesus had no such hesitation. Matthew’s gospel says that “at once” or “immediately” they left their boats and nets behind and followed Jesus. Mark’s gospel uses that word “immediately” a lot; Jesus immediately does this and immediately goes there all throughout. Matthew’s gospel, on the other hand, doesn’t do that nearly as much, so when Matthew borrows a trick out of Mark’s book, he’s probably trying to highlight the fact that they really

did respond to the call of Jesus with no hesitation. *Immediately* they dropped what they were doing and followed Him.

Why would they do that? Lots of people today fantasize about giving it all up and becoming a totally different person living a totally different life, but relatively few of us actually do it. There are just too many things holding us where we are. We read stories of people who sell everything and move out into the wilderness and live off the land, or people who leave a lucrative but unfulfilling career on Wall Street to become a chef or an artist or a craftsman, or people who trade in their mortgaged house for a tiny cabin in the woods, and sometimes we envy them. In a lot of cases people can only do that because they have enough of a safety net built up to be able to afford to fail, and that's hardly true of everyone today and it certainly wasn't true for these first disciples.

This is where some understanding of that culture does actually help, because their world and their lives were full of rigid social expectations with little concern for normal people. They didn't work at their family business the way we think of family businesses, and they weren't middle class because there really was no middle class in those days. You didn't produce enough food or fish sauce or olive oil or whatever else to support your family, pay a reasonable tax, and then get to keep the rest as profit to build up your retirement. On the contrary, the people at the bottom of the pyramid – which was pretty much everyone – lived and worked in a vast system to increase the wealth of their kings and emperors. It was not uncommon that farmers would have to give a third or even a half of their produce to their superiors as a tax, and that's not counting the various tolls and duties they would have to pay for transporting their product, and *that's* not counting the bribes and graft that the various tax collectors could impose along the way.

There was very little social mobility, and there was no real expectation that you would better yourself. Children didn't grow up with the American Dream of living a better life than their parents. In fact, you grew up with the heavy expectation of living exactly the same life as your parents, and any sort of ambition for a common person was seen as a possible threat to the social order. In general, you didn't live for your own advancement or personal benefit, and you didn't chase your dreams or try to fulfill your potential. You lived and died as one part of a family and clan and community, and you filled your role in the group. So while it was not unheard of for people like Peter and Andrew to choose a different life than the one they were living, it was rare and risky.

But that's true of us, too. It may be true in different ways, but it's still true: we also have all kinds of reasons not to leave our nets, follow Jesus, and become fishers of people. It's still risky for most people to make that sort of decision. Maybe that's part of why it's harder to change as you get older; you have more to lose. Maybe that's why many of us are willing to commit to following Jesus up to a point: we want what He offers us, but we're not sure we want to give what He calls us to sacrifice. Our reasons may be different than they were for first-century fishermen, but it's still hard to be willing to leave it all behind and willingly walk into an unknown future. So what made them do it? Was it just their temperament? Were they just the kinds of people who were looking for greener grass or an adventure or a cause to fight for? Maybe, but maybe not. Maybe they weren't looking for a different lifestyle, maybe they were looking for a different Lord.

We might fantasize about a different lifestyle, but maybe we're not likely to try to change and run the risk of failure unless we're either forced to change or we know enough about the change to

really understand its ins and outs. That's not the same as wanting a different Lord: for that, all it takes is a recognition that whatever or whoever is ruling your life now is corrupt, powerless, or uncaring. Then you might be interested in changing your allegiance. Then you might be interested in conversion.

Because that's what we're really talking about here: conversion, a new allegiance to a different Lord. It's different than a change in lifestyle, where you pick and choose which options you want based on your preferences and research and wisdom. No, it's purely, simply, completely bending the knee before a person, saying "not my will but yours," giving your life to that person come what may. You're not choosing from a menu, you're choosing to suspend your own will and plans and desires and instead choosing your Lord's will and plans and desires, and what He calls you to becomes your life. These fishermen didn't become disciples of Jesus because they knew and understood everything that was going to happen to them as a result. They saw in Jesus someone they wanted as their Lord.

Those first-century Galilean fishermen were embedded in a system of empire that existed almost entirely for the benefit of those at the top. Being a part of that system was implicitly an acknowledgement of the lordship of the Roman emperor: you served your lord, and Caesar was your lord. So putting down their nets was more than just taking a personal risk, it was also more than a little subversive: it was a political statement that they were shifting their allegiance to a new kingdom. They may not have realized all that they were committing to at the time, but that's what Jesus was preaching: the coming of the kingdom of God. They were setting aside the old empire of Caesar that was built on fear and violence and the exploitation of those at the bottom, and instead they were taking up the empire of Jesus Christ. He called them not to become soldiers for His new army, He called them to become fishers of people. The focus of the kingdom of Jesus is to gather those who are scattered and wandering — not to do violence to them or take advantage of them, but to offer them blessing, if they'll take it. This is why I've said many times that the gospel of Jesus Christ is incredibly political: not because Jesus votes for Republicans or Jesus votes for Democrats, but because Jesus doesn't vote at all. Jesus is the Lord, and He is Lord of a kingdom that rejects the methods of the world's politics, and in so doing He rejects the lordship of Caesar and all those who come after Caesar.

So being made fishers of people is much more than just a nice image for a Sunday school lesson. It's even more than just an image for how Christians should be evangelists and witnesses for Christ. It's a call to conversion, to lay aside the familiar things that are our sources of strength and claim a new lord instead. It's a call to conversion from the old empire of fear and violence and selfishness and instead claim the new kingdom of Christ that is built on the love of God. Why would we do that? Why would I want to take the risk of wholeheartedly following Jesus when I've already prayed and been baptized and been a part of the church, when I'm set with my golden ticket to heaven when I die, when I'm satisfied with my life and following Jesus might mean an uncertain future of change? Why would I want to make Jesus my Lord when He's already my savior, and that's enough for me?

Peter and Andrew and James and John and the other first disciples of Jesus didn't follow Him on a whim. They followed Him immediately, but they didn't do it for adventure or excitement. They did it because they were expectant. A preacher named Alyce McKenzie wrote that "every decision takes place in a context," meaning that the decisions we make to follow Jesus wholeheartedly or

halfheartedly or not at all don't come out of nowhere, they come out of the foundation we've already laid in our lives. Peter and Andrew and the other disciples were living in a culture of expectancy; they were eager to see what God was going to do. They were waiting for a Messiah, so when He came, they jumped at the chance to answer the call.

Matthew sets things up by quoting from the passage from Isaiah 9 that we read, a passage that refers to these two areas governed by two tribes of Israel, Zebulon and Naphtali. These two tribes had in previous centuries lived in the area around the Sea of Galilee where Jesus began His ministry, and that area was historically on the border with neighboring nations that were not always friendly. Zebulon and Naphtali lived under the constant threat of being overrun until, eventually, they were among the first to be conquered and taken into exile. These were lands that had lived under the threat of darkness until the threat became real; they were aching for a Messiah because they were aware of their need. Matthew is telling us that Jesus is the fulfillment of that expectation.

The situation was different by the time of Jesus; some of those old nations had been gobbled up by the Romans. But Peter and Andrew and James and John were living in expectation of what God could do, so when the moment came, they were ready. Sometimes our comfort or our complacency or our fear of having to give up something to change overrules our expectation of what God can do with our act of commitment. Jesus calls us not only to give up our life of sin and follow Him, He also calls us to give up our reliance on all those things that are replacements for Him and His kingdom. We're not ready to completely change our allegiance because we haven't really examined those things in our lives that we're holding onto in place of Jesus, and we don't really have an expectation for what God can do instead.

Are you satisfied with what you have, or are you expectant for what God can do? Are you settled with just going along for the ride, being bound by some old empire that Jesus is calling you out of? Or are you ready for a new Lord? Do you believe that Jesus has anything worth waiting for and sacrificing for, or is what you have enough? I encourage you right now and throughout this week to pray asking God to reveal to you anything you're holding onto in place of Jesus. What is there that would prevent you from fully embracing Him as your Lord? It might be fear, it might be greed, it might be a grudge, it might be complacency. Ask Him to reveal that to you and teach you how to put down your nets and follow Him in His mission.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)