

Follow Jesus To God's Good Kingdom (Mark 1:14-20)

- 1) God's kingdom is the good news
- 2) Be willing to sacrifice all for it

What are some examples of good news you've heard before? We all have different ideas of what makes a piece of news good or not. But as I think back in my life when I heard good news, I think of one of the first times I saw my name on a paycheck. I was 15 years old and cleaned the lobby at the local McDonald's. Although I didn't like the work and only made 5 some dollars an hour, I liked looking at my paycheck. It was the good news of money to spend and a feeling of accomplishment. I've been told that when an expecting couple hears the news "*It's a boy!*" or "*It's a girl!*" the parents glow with joy. They have received the good news that their family will be blessed with another soul. Students of all ages rejoice when class is unexpectedly canceled or their teacher hands out extra credit. We all receive good news in one way or another. But no matter how good the news is that we hear, it will always be lacking. My paycheck as a 15 year-old would not cover my living expenses today. The joy of having a boy or girl is likely hidden when discipline needs to happen. The extra credit that saves our grade is the extra work we suddenly have to make up for the work we should have done before. But as we see in our verses from Mark chapter 1, there is one piece of good news that doesn't fade away. It's the good news of God's kingdom. And as the Gospel of Mark shows us for this morning, we'll see how we follow Jesus to remain in God's good kingdom.

Before we get too far into the account where Jesus calls his first 4 apostles, we would be wise to look at what God's kingdom is. After King Herod imprisoned John the Baptist for speaking out against his sinful marriage to his sister-in-law Herodias (Matthew 14:3), Jesus went back north to Galilee where things weren't so hot. In Galilee Jesus proclaimed the same message that John the Baptist had said to the crowds. A summary of their message is, "**The time has come...the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news**" (Mark 1:15)! Contrary to what the people of Jesus' time thought and many people in our time think, God's kingdom is not a physical location on earth with its own flag or currency.ⁱ God's kingdom is found where he reigns as king – in the hearts of believers. Those who believe that Christ is their only Savior from sin are in God's good kingdom. We call it good because those who are in it have the forgiveness of all their sins. That's something that no kingdom on earth can deliver. Only God can give us that.

And our 4 fishermen for this morning – Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John – they knew firsthand how good God's kingdom is. They already knew Jesus and his message of God's kingdom coming soon.ⁱⁱ And when Jesus said to them "**Come, follow me...and I will send you out to fish for people**" (Mark 1:17) they immediately left everything behind to follow their Savior. What motivated them to do this sudden career change? To go from a steady

incomeⁱⁱⁱ and a predictable life to changing addresses and relying on God's providence? Simple. God's kingdom is that good because what it offers is better than anything the kingdoms of this world can offer. The complete forgiveness of all your sins. Peace with God on this side of the grave. The guarantee of eternal life of heaven. What could hold our 4 fishermen back from following Jesus? What could be more important than being with their Lord 24/7? Nothing!^{iv}

How well do you follow Jesus? What's holding you back from following him with a completely willing spirit? Does it come from misunderstanding God's kingdom to be a more prosperous life on earth? So easily we judge everything on its immediate practicality. If the church gives me what I'm looking for today, then I'll stay. But if it doesn't help me now then I'll write it off. But God's kingdom is not about creating a utopian society to mirror the Garden of Eden. God's good kingdom is about your forgiven status before God which in turn has practical side effects on your life today. Do you hold back from following Jesus because your understanding of saving faith is flawed? Jesus didn't go around the Sea of Galilee simply telling people to acknowledge that he existed.^v He said, **“Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15b)!** Take the message of sins forgiven to heart and trust what your Savior has done for you on the cross!

Is the mirage of this world's comforts or peace holding you back from following Jesus to God's good kingdom? When we see these 4 fishermen obey Jesus' call to follow him into the public ministry, we have to marvel at what they were willing to sacrifice! Fishing is what they knew and their lives were localized in this corner of the world.^{vi} To be willing to give all that up and face the unknown is a lot to ask for. But as we've already discussed, they were willing to sacrifice all that to follow Jesus because they knew how good God's kingdom is.

The only reason why God's kingdom is so good is because Jesus did not hold anything back for us. In Mark chapter 1 Jesus tells us **“the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15a)**. The reason why it hadn't come yet is because Jesus still had to complete the plan for salvation. Our forgiveness comes from the cross because it was there the only truly good one died as punishment for our sins. Jesus paid the price for our hesitations to follow him with willing hearts. And if you're holding back from believing that promise, go to Easter's empty tomb. It is there you see the proof that Jesus has power over death and the power to forgive. He has brought us the good news of forgiveness.

And he offers to you the blessings of God's good kingdom. As we see in Mark chapter 1, Jesus doesn't restrict this to the high and mighty. He extended it to 4 blue-collar fishermen. During and after Jesus' ministry we see people of all walks of life and ethnicities brought into God's good kingdom. That good kingdom is alive and well in your and my hearts through faith in our Lord. And this is all freely given as an undeserved gift. It is by God's grace that Jesus won for us the good news of sins forgiven. It is by God's grace that he called Simon Peter,

Andrew, James, and John to be his first 4 apostles. It is by God's grace that we too have the good news as surely as they did.

Don't hold back from following Jesus to remain in God's good kingdom. Take a hint from the 4 fishermen and be willing to sacrifice whatever is necessary to keep your sights on Jesus. Now I'm not saying you should take a vow of poverty. In fact you may be doing yourself and others more harm than good if we you willingly went into poverty. The apostles didn't command this nor do any of the biblical writers say you have to live as a poor person to be a true Christian.^{vii} Rather what we see is the willingness to follow Jesus to God's good kingdom than the misleading ways to the world's kingdoms. Simon Peter and Andrew did this. After Jesus said **"Come, follow me...and I will send you out to fish for people" (Mark 1:17)** Simon Peter and Andrew **"at once...left their nets and followed him" (Mark 1:18)**. When Jesus gave a similar command to James and John **"they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him" (Mark 1:20b)**. Earlier I asked you what was holding you back from following Jesus. I'm guessing you'll need to mull that over before you get to the foundational answer. Once you get your answer, adopt the willing spirit of the apostles and be willing to sacrifice whatever gets in the way of you following Jesus to God's good kingdom and remaining in its blessings forever.^{viii}

There is no better news than the good news of God's kingdom. It is the truth of Jesus Christ who held nothing back to be our Savior. He went to the cross as punishment for our sins. He rose from the dead to prove that his good news of forgiveness is the truth for all time. And he has given that good news to you and to me. Let nothing hold you back from following Jesus to God's good kingdom. Be willing to give up whatever is in the way between you and your God. And keep your eyes on the prize in heaven so that you may end up where Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John are right now. Amen.

ⁱ Jesus' reply to Pontius Pilate in John 18:36 frankly says this. As seen in other verses, God's kingdom is defined by where God rules as king – in heaven and in the hearts of all believers. God's omnipotent also extends to the world. But it is the devil who is called the ruler of the world in verses like Ephesians 2:2 and Revelation 12:7-9. For more information on the different places we find God's kingdom, contact your pastor.

ⁱⁱ John 1:35-42 includes that Simon Peter and (most likely) John were followers of John the Baptist and present when Jesus and John the Baptist crossed paths. The Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John include more details of Jesus' ministry chronologically prior to Mark 1:14-20 which show that many of the apostles had a prior relationship with Jesus than indicated by Mark's Gospel.

ⁱⁱⁱ In Mark 1:20 we see that John and James came from a secure fishing family for their father Zebedee had hired men to work in the family fishing business. Some commentators have said this made it easier for James and John to leave and follow Jesus because Zebedee wasn't abandoned to do all the work by himself. Others commentators have said it would have been harder for James and John to leave the relative wealth of their family to be a full-time follower of Jesus. I see merit in both conclusions.

^{iv} A note of clarification about the call given to Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Jesus gave them the call to enter the public ministry as modern-day pastors, teachers, and staff ministers have received. God has not given this call to all the laity. Rather than get lost in the definition and details of calls made to clergy and laity, I refer you to the doctrine of vocation. Martin Luther wrote a good amount about this doctrine to correct the common understanding of his time about the false superiority of the monks and clergy over the rest of the laity. In the rest of the sermon I change gears from the call for the public ministry and to the general call for following Jesus that all Christians have regardless of their vocation.

^v This is the definition of historical faith – an intellectual acknowledge of Jesus' life and death. Yet the Bible teaches that only knowing the facts about Jesus is not enough for salvation. One needs to have saving faith – belief in the promises offered at the cross and empty tomb by the Lord.

^{vi} Since the Bible does not tell us much about the childhoods or personal lives of the apostles, I conservatively assume Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John were like typical fishermen who worked, lived, and died near the place of their birth.

^{vii} Nor should a person take a vow of poverty to make themselves better in God's eyes. This is a false understanding from the monastic community which lifts up willful poverty as a way of gaining additional good works.

^{viii} Because of time and space constraints, I did not go into the additional method Jesus provides for us to remain in God's kingdom. It is the final phrase of Mark 1:15 – "Repent and believe the good news!" "Repenting" means to have a change of heart towards sin. "Believe the good news" means to trust in the message of sins forgiven at the cross. When these two happen on a

continual basis, then a person is continually connected to God's Word and thus to God's kingdom.