

February 8, 2026

“Fishing for People”

Matthew 4:18-22

Intro:

How do you “Fish for people”? This is the question that was forefront in my mind as I was reading about Jesus’ invitation to those first disciples to follow him.

Picture the scene with me... here is Jesus walking along the shore of the sea of Galilee and he wanders past the place where Peter and Andrew are going about their business of fishing. This is not a personal pleasure fishing moment for those boys... No, this is their business and their livelihood. Probably they had a little booth set up nearby where they would sell the fish fresh from the lake. Maybe they had hired a neighbourhood kid to run the stand while they did the hard work of fishing. Or maybe they took turns fishing and selling so that they could get a little rest along the way. It was hard work, whatever the situation. They weren’t just standing on the shore with a pole in hand and a handy bucket of bait, casually casting and reeling and casting and reeling, hoping to catch a few fish for that night’s meal. They would have been standing a little way into the water, tossing a large net that was weighted down with rocks, making it heavy enough when dry, but add the weight of the water to it (not to mention any fish!) and it would have been an extraordinary amount of work. The net would be thrown out into the water in such a way that it would splay out, and then it would sink down to the bottom, trapping fish as it went. Then, once it was on the bottom, the men would slowly haul it back to the shore, being careful to make sure that the fish stayed trapped by the net.

Once they had the net on shore, they would have to free the fish from the netting and then straighten out the net from any knots or twists that had gotten into it and then repeat the process all over again. Sometimes they would take a boat and go out into the deeper waters, but on this particular morning that Jesus walks by, they are working from the shoreline.

Some of you, maybe reading or hearing about this encounter with Jesus for the first time, might be asking why Jesus spoke to those men in the first place? Surely, they weren't the only fishermen working on that shoreline. Also, why would they have listened to Jesus? Most scholars understand that this is not those men's first encounter with Jesus. In the gospel of John, Jesus and his disciples go to a wedding in Cana, and it is believed that that event preceded the official calling to be fishers of people. If we just look at Matthew's account, Jesus had already been moving in the area preaching and teaching, and so it is reasonable that Peter and Andrew (and James and John who are called to follow Jesus next) would have had opportunity to hear Him and to get a sense of who He is and what He was about. Jesus carried in Him authority, and His authority was attractive and trustworthy. So, when He called, the men answered.

Fishing for People:

Following Jesus was not a new concept – crowds of people were already beginning to follow Jesus around, but being specifically invited to follow Him was a new thing. It was also kind of backwards. In Jewish society, a rabbi's reputation would precede him (as it does with Jesus), and potential disciples would approach the rabbi with a request to learn from him. Jesus flips it around and approaches the potential disciples with a request for them to learn from Him. If that wasn't unusual enough, and it was, and it would have caught people's attention as being out of the ordinary, Jesus doesn't just say "Come and I will teach you all about the Holy Scriptures". He says, "Follow me and I will teach you how to fish for people." How do you fish for people? We can read this, and maybe Peter and crew heard it this way, as being a direct connection to the fishing that they already knew how to do – cast the net, reel it back in and repeat, hoping that someone got caught in the net. But that image doesn't give a good picture or understanding of what Jesus really did. He wasn't out there trying to trap people with a weighted argument. He wasn't standing along the side jigging a rod hoping that someone would take the bait and get caught on the hook to be reeled in.

The words of Jesus were specific though, and so we have to assume there is some connection to fishing. Perhaps, maybe, since a fisherman understands the

behaviour of fish, that Jesus is saying He will show those brothers how to apply their knowledge to understand people. However those words are understood, the invitation from Jesus is to come and follow him. To be His disciple and to learn from Him what He is about.

The Lesson:

How does one fish for people? The next big scene in Matthew begins to answer that for us. Chapter five starts off with the famous sermon on the Mount. Jesus is going about His business – healing and helping, the disciples are watching and trying to figure out their place in that work, and the crowds of people are getting bigger and more needy. Jesus sees them and sits down to teach. Maybe He is primarily addressing the whole crowd. Maybe he is only addressing his disciples but is speaking loudly enough to be overheard by the wider crowd. Our understanding could accommodate either option. Regardless of who he is addressing, the message is what is important. This sermon tells them why Jesus does what he does. Jesus is trying to get his disciples to understand that there is more to the Kingdom of Heaven than the strict following of rules. There is the heart of the rules, the Person of God who has given them, and the people for whom they have been given. Jesus is saying that in order to fish for people, you need to understand that heart. In understanding the heart of His teaching, they are able to understand the heart of the people who need it.

Here is the fishing connection – just like Peter and Andrew and James and John would have understood the patterns and needs of fish, Jesus is now showing them how the Gospel (although it is not called that yet) reveals and speaks into the patterns and needs of people. And the Gospel, the good news, is only revealed through the actions and behaviour of the “fishermen”, the disciples. What does that look like? It looks like caring for people where they are and where you are. Jesus doesn’t get up from the sermon on the mount and immediately begin to host rallies and protests. He doesn’t stand out on a street corner and preach to people that they are doomed. He doesn’t whip out his Bible to show people absolutes of right and wrong, and why they are wrong. He uses his time and gifts of grace and mercy to heal people. He sees their need and does what he

can to meet that need. As he does so, opportunities come up where he can speak about the Kingdom of Heaven, and God's love.

Conclusion:

This is what the disciples were learning. Fishing for people is something that can, and should, happen in the everyday events of our lives. It happens in the workplace. It happens in the restaurant, and at our recreational pursuits. It isn't about carefully prepared presentations; it is about seeing and recognizing that people need to meet Jesus. It is understanding that they do that through their encounter with us. We don't have to drop everything and go off on a mission trip to some far-off country – although you can, and those are good. God is calling you to follow him where you are already engaged in life. He is asking, will you bring Him with you?

Sometimes we think that unless we have a radical call to drop everything, like the disciples, we can't really be following Jesus well. The truth is that those disciples received a particular call for a particular task. As I said, Jesus wants us to follow Him where we already are. I want to end with a quote from Michael Wilkins' commentary:

“Whatever our profession, whether preacher or plumber, teacher or technician, hotel maid or hospital orderly, discipleship means that we place as the priority of our lives joining with Jesus in reaching our daily world with the good news of life in the kingdom of heaven... We each have a privileged place of ministry that is unique to following Jesus in our own daily lives.”¹

Jesus didn't teach his disciples how to fish for people by giving them a preaching class. He showed them His life, and what it looks like to live as a follower of Jesus. He has shown the same thing to each of you as well.

Let's pray.

¹ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew: From Biblical Text-- to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2004), 187.