

DESCENDING INTO GREATNESS

“The Apprentice”

I think I was three years old when I started my first apprenticeship. When I was three, my dad was 34, more than 11 times more experienced and practiced at life and he became my first mentor, as I learned to imitate his every move. Turning 5, I started apprenticing under my piano teacher, Mrs. Schultz, who drilled me on scales and coached me through classic piano sonatas like “ABC Builds a Boat,” launching down the path to becoming a pianist just like her. After university, I served a brief stint as an apprentice in a construction company. Assigned to an experienced tradesman, I was told that if I did everything he said, he would mold me into a journeyman electrician, just like him. Construction drove me into theological education, where I met my preaching professor Dr. Edwards, who took me under his wing, modeling the power of a biblical sermon and tutoring me on the finer points of delivery. In 2003 Christa and I first sat down with our marriage mentors, a couple who had forged a long term marriage of a quality we longed to emulate, who served as advisors, models, and an inspiration, shaping our marriage.

At one point in my life, I met for the first time with my spiritual mentor, Jesus. At some point I started a “life apprenticeship” under Jesus. As a saviour, advisor, model and inspiration, he started showing me the ropes of life and giving shape to my soul. Yet, for a long time, I don’t think I really got what it meant to apprentice under Jesus. I don’t think I really understood the goal of being his disciple. If you had asked me to identify the marks of a Christian, I probably would have given a variety of answers: regular Bible reading, faithful Sunday attendance, tithing 10% of your income, daily prayer, baptism and good deeds. These days, the more I read texts like Mark 1:14-20, the more I read stories about Jesus’ first disciples, stories about people like Simon, the closer I think I’m getting to the heart of what it means to apprentice under Jesus.

There was nothing about Simon that would have qualified him as a really remarkable human being. As best as anyone could tell, Simon was just another muscle-bound fisherman, pulling in fish by night and shuttling back and forth between the Sea of Galilee and the markets of Israel by day. As best as anyone could tell, Simon and his

brother Andrew were awfully good at what they did. Simon himself never anticipated the kind of success he and Andrew would experience when they moved from Bethsaida to Capernaum to pursue a business opportunity. In Capernaum they signed on with their new partners, James and John, who were themselves in the process of assuming control of their father Zebedee's fishing business, the one he had built from nothing. Since teaming up, Simon and the others had rapidly expanded Zebedee's mom and pop fishing shop. These days, they spent nearly as much time managing as fishing, supervising a sizable staff, that fished, mended nets, maintained their small handful of boats, shipped and sold their product in markets across the country. Business could hardly be better.

Life could hardly be better. It was in Capernaum that Simon had met his bride-to-be and had first gotten to know her family. A couple of short years later, he and his wife lived close enough to take care of her mom, just a couple of streets over from her the rest of her siblings. Expanding the business had been good for James' and John's family as well. Two more devoted sons would have been hard to find. Zebedee was their father and hero and their commitment was to do what good sons do, provide a secure future for their dad as he embraced his twilight years.

Spiritually, Simon was in pretty good shape, though he certainly wasn't a spiritual fanatic like some Jews. He had never been tempted to join the desert commune of the Essenes, a strict, ascetic sect of devout Jews, who strived for holiness by separating themselves from mainstream culture, like some modern Mennonite groups. He was never tempted to become a Pharisee, the ancient answer to modern American evangelicals: pious, powerful and political. Devoted to God's Word and to godliness, they developed a sophisticated system of religious rules and rituals intended to guide people into a deeper life with God. He didn't qualify as a Sadducee. Similar to modern mainline priests, Sadducees served in the Temple, performing the formal religious rites described by Jewish Law. He didn't have the theological education of a rabbi, the ancient answer to modern low-church pastors who interpreted and taught the Scriptures to the people. He was just a regular guy making his way through life, going to synagogue most Sabbaths and trying to live under God as a good Jew, decent husband and honest businessman.

At the end of the day, life seemed to be working well enough for Simon, until the day that Jesus showed up. It had been a while since Simon had first heard about Jesus through his brother Andrew. As a disciple of John the Baptist, Andrew had heard John speak in lofty terms about the greatness of this unimpressively normal-looking Galilean, saying that Jesus was the Christ, the king God had sent into the world to push back the darkness of sin and reclaim the world for good. John even said that Jesus would one day take away the sin of the world and that was enough for Andrew. He got on the Jesus train and started talking about Jesus with his Simon.

At had only been recently that Simon had heard Jesus preach for himself.

Mark 1:14 [NIV] — After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the [gospel] of God.

Jesus had called his message a “gospel”, a royal proclamations of good news. Every person under the Roman Empire understood what a gospel was. Every time a son was born to Caesar, every coronation day, in the wake of every military victory, in preparation for every Imperial visit, a Roman messenger would go from town to town announcing the “gospel”, the good news. Now, Jesus’ gospel, his good news, had nothing to do with the Roman kingdom. It had everything to do with God’s kingdom. The “the gospel of God” was not a new idea to the Jews. It came from the book of Isaiah, who was the first to describe this “gospel of God”.

Isaiah 52:7 [NIV] — How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring [the gospel], who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to [Israel], “Your God reigns!”

The “gospel of God” was that God had finally restored his presence and sovereign power to the world; that God was once again in charge! It was the same gospel that Jesus preached.

Mark 1:15a [NIV] — “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near.”

Jesus’ gospel was that the decisive moment for all of history had finally arrived. The bell had rung, the threshold had been reached, the door had opened, the prerequisites were realized. The curtain was coming up on the drama. God’s kingdom, his sovereign authority, was now a reality in time and space. God was finally fulfilling his eternal purpose of restoring humanity, society and creation to the way they were always supposed to be. God was invading human history to rescue humanity from Satan, sin, injustice disease, division, oppression, and death.

God's kingdom, his active redemption of all creation, is real and here in the here and now.

It was the kind of gospel that really was good news in Israel, the kind of gospel that caught people's attention and really got people talking. That's why by the time Simon saw Jesus walking alone in the mist on the beach that morning he already knew who Jesus was and what he was all about. It was just before dawn and James and John were busying themselves, with Zebedee and some of the night staff, fixing, folding and cleaning the nets after a long night in the water. Simon and Andrew were taking advantage of the final few tranquil moments before the first light broke through to toss their nets into the water one last time. Suddenly, the soft slap of rope nets flopping on the water was broken by a crisp shout from the shore, the voice of Jesus calling. "You two, come with me! I want you to be a part of what I'm doing! Let's go!" By the time Simon turned to look, Jesus was already moving down the beaching, approaching James, John in their boat, calling out the same invitation. "Join me!"

Simon knew exactly what Jesus was asking. Jesus wanted Simon, Andrew, James and John to just drop everything and follow him. Jesus was asking them to leave their lives behind, to walk away from a lucrative and growing business, their community, friends and family and instead to choose a life of apprenticing under him. Jesus was asking them to give up everything they had ever really known to take a chance on him, to gamble with their lives and bet the farm on the off chance that Jesus really was who he said he was, that he was ushering in a new era of God's activity in the world, invading human history to rescue humanity from Satan, sin, injustice disease, division, oppression, and death. Simon knew precisely what Jesus was asking because he had heard Jesus give the same invitation at the end of the sermon he preached to the crowds.

Mark 1:15b [NIV] — "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe [in the gospel]."

Jesus always called people to action. He was always trying to get people to buy into the vision of what God was doing and to give their lives to joining him. That's why Jesus always called people to repent. When Jesus said, "repent" he didn't mean what people usually mean when they use that word in church. "Repent" literally means, "change your mind", so church people will often say that it means we should, "think differently about the horrible

things you've done," or "apologize for being a sinner." But Jesus was not primarily challenging people to an intellectual exercise. At times the word "repent" comes with emotional overtones, as though it means, "feel bad because you're a sinner," or "regret doing terrible things in your life." That's not what Jesus means. Repentance is not primarily an emotional exercise. Repentance is an act of the will. These things may be by-products of true repentance, but true repentance is making a decisive break with your past and striking out in a radical new direction with God, abandoning everything that competes with Jesus for your attention and our allegiance. It is walking away from your old lifestyle, values, priorities, dreams, and purpose wherever they clash with Jesus' lifestyle, values, priorities, dreams and purpose, in a whole-hearted, whole life surrender to God.

Not only does Jesus' call people to repent, he also calls people to believe, another word stained and tarnished by 2000 years of Christianese. Church people often describe faith as the intellectual exercise of giving mental assent to a series of biblical propositions, like you'd find on the "We Believe" portion of your program. It is mentally going through the checklist of orthodox Christian doctrine. At other times people describe faith as an experience, the feeling of peace in turmoil, fullness in worship, or excitement in baptism. But faith is not primarily an intellectual or emotional exercise. Faith is an act of the will. These things may be by-products of true faith, but faith means trusting God enough to leave their life in his hands, even if it makes no sense. It is betting your life on God's plan without having a backup plan. Faith assumes that God's plan is by definition far superior to whatever we've been fumbling around with apart from him, even if it makes life harder, even if I don't get my way. Faith is convinced that God knows what he's doing and trusts him to do the best thing with your life. That's what Jesus wanted. Jesus wanted to inspire people with a vision of life under God's leadership, so that they would choose to make a radical break with their past and trust God enough to go wherever he leads and do whatever he asks, to literally trust God with their lives.

That was the challenge that Jesus threw before Simon that morning, to leave his old life in the past and trust God with his future. Jesus was challenging Simon to choose to walk away from his old lifestyle, values, priorities,

dreams, and purpose wherever they clashed with Jesus' lifestyle, values, priorities, dreams and purpose: to leave behind a life where his business was his top priority and trust God enough to spend his life on something other than fishing; to leave behind a life where his family received highest honours to trust God enough to take care of his family as he went after Jesus; to leave behind a life of half-hearted churchianity, passionless, good-enough spirituality, where sin is excused and excuses go unchecked to trust God enough to passionately pursue a life with Jesus, a life that was something bigger, something more.

Mark 1:17 [TNIV] — “‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’”

Jesus was calling Simon to walk away from his old lifestyle, values, priorities, dreams, and purpose to live a life of purpose, fulfillment, and meaning partnering with Jesus reclaim the world for good, to deal first with the sin in his own life and then the sin beyond it. Following Jesus means more than granting mental assent to a set of propositions or engaging in emotional experiences of faith. To Jesus, a follower is a fisher, nothing less. An apprentice is someone who trades in all their sin and trivial pursuits to receive a new life from God and then spends that new life changing other lives for God, partnering with God to rescue humanity from Satan, sin, injustice disease, division, oppression, and death in the world.

That's the vision that Simon caught, the one he ultimately chose to give his life to.

Mark 1:18 [NIV] — *At once they left their nets and followed him.*

Simon saw a chance to do something bigger with his life than the vision he had been chasing, a chance to invest in something greater than the trivial pursuits he had been pouring into. Simon saw a chance to stop trying to cobble together a meaningful identity out of business success, to stop trying to root his purpose in perch. He saw a chance to stop trying to squeeze life's fulfillment out of a marriage and family, to stop forcing loved ones to do what only the Lord can do. He saw a chance to stop fiddling around with middle-of-the-road, mediocre, lukewarm spiritual commitment and to root his life in passionately partnering with Jesus to deal with the sin in his own life and to tackle the problem of sin in the rest of the world, partnering with God to rescue humanity from Satan, sin, injustice disease, division, oppression, and death.

To Jesus, a follower is a fisher and nothing less and when Simon caught that vision, it made all the difference in life. When Simon realized that building his own kingdom paled in comparison to building God's kingdom, Jesus renamed him Peter, "the Rock", and said that his ministry would be part of the foundation on which God would build his church. When Simon chose to pour his leadership horsepower into God's business rather than a fishing business, God made him the leader of the early Christian movement. Simon gave up investing his time, talents, effort and energy in feeding people supper and God empowered him to feed people spiritually, preaching sermons that changed lives by the thousands. Simon opted to quit fishing for perch to start fishing for people and God used him to carry the good news about Jesus to Gentiles for the first time. Simon decided he'd rather give himself to mending lives than mending nets and God used him to heal people by the dozens. Simon decided to give himself to something bigger than keeping books on fish sales and God gave him the chance to add books to the New Testament of the Bible, writing two books himself and inspiring Mark to write a third. When Simon heard Jesus' vision for a life with God, it inspired him to walk away from his old life and to trust God for a new life and to use his life fishing for people, and in Simon's life, it made all the difference. Because Simon was willing to walk away from his old life as a spiritually mediocre perch fisherman to embrace a new vision, God's vision for his life, God literally used him to change the world. Do you think Simon ever regretted the day he stopped fishing for perch and started fishing for people? Not for one second!

And neither would you. Jesus is calling us to apprentice under him, just like Simon. He is offering us forgiveness and new life and inviting us to partner with him in pushing back the darkness and reclaiming this world for good. Jesus' hope is that a clear vision of the kingdom inspires a response in me, a response of repentance and faith. Jesus' hope is that we would trust God enough to walk away from our old lifestyle, values, priorities, dreams, and purpose where they clash with the lifestyle, values, priorities, dreams and purpose of Jesus, in a whole-hearted, whole life surrender to God. That's what it means to start an apprenticeship with Jesus.

An apprentice trusts that God's way is better and walks away from sin. An apprentice trusts God to deal

with their loneliness and walks away from bad relationships. An apprentice trusts God to help them to cope with life and walks away from addictions to love, fear, substances, or work. An apprentice trusts God for a sense of acceptance and walks away from peer pressure, pride or reputation. An apprentice trusts God for a sense of purpose and walks away from depending on an education and career, from chasing success.

Yet, it's not just the response in us of repentance and faith that Jesus desires. Jesus' hope is that a clear vision of the kingdom inspires a response from us as well, a commitment to fishing for people. Not treating people like projects, but committing our lives to making someone else's life better for Jesus' sake. A month ago, Jeff asked us to identify the people whose lives would be better because of ours this year. What have you done about that? Whether it is a spouse, a friend, a classmate, or an employee, we all know people who need to feel the touch of Jesus, to experience his compassionate, inclusive, healing, hope-giving love in their lives. So, who have you touched lately? How have you used your spiritual gifts? What friendships have you offered to people who need Jesus in their life? How have you served the hungry, the sick, a stranger, a victim or the imprisoned with the love of Jesus? With whom have you shared the difference that Jesus makes? A follower is a fisher, nothing less. So, how have you given your life to fishing for people? What are you doing to devote your life to helping others experience the forgiveness, freedom, power and love that comes through the touch of Jesus in their life?

I want us to take some time this morning to just sit quietly with God and reflect on where we are in our apprenticeship with Jesus, to consider the decisions that we need to make to more closely follow Jesus with our whole lives. For some of us, God is going to reveal that there are hard decisions to be made about areas where we know we need to just trust God and walk away. For some of us, God is going to reveal that there are hard realities to face about the fact that we've been living for ourselves, not others. Take advantage of the video that will be playing in the background to prompt your thoughts about your life with Jesus. Take advantage of the space provided in your program to reflect on some of what God brings to mind. Take advantage of the next few moments to just sit quietly, you and God and do some business with him.

[Reflection Video]

Simon gave his life to apprenticing under Jesus and it made all the difference, not just in his own life but in the world around as God used him to help push back the darkness and reclaim this world for good. What difference will it make in and through us, as we give our lives to living as apprentices as well, trading our old lives to God for new lives from God to change lives for God.

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