

The Real Thing Week Five: “Answering the Call”

Scripture Passage Mark 2:13-22 (NRSV)

¹³ Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. ¹⁴ As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

¹⁵ And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹⁷ When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

¹⁸ Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” ¹⁹ Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰ The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

²¹ “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. ²² And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

Weekly Reading Passage

“What is said about the content of discipleship? Follow me, walk behind me! That is all. Going after him is something without specific content. It is truly not a program for one’s life which would be sensible to implement. It is neither a goal nor an ideal to be sought. It is not even a matter for which, according to human inclination, it would be worth investing anything at all, much less oneself. And what happens? Those called leave everything they have, not in order to do something valuable. Instead, they do it simply for the sake of the call itself, because otherwise they could not walk behind Jesus. Nothing of importance is attached to this action in itself. It remains something completely insignificant, unworthy of notice. The bridges are torn down, and the followers simply move ahead. They are called away and are supposed to “step out” of their previous existence, they are supposed to “exist” in the strict sense of the word. Former things are left behind; they are completely given up. The disciple is thrown out of the relative security of life into complete insecurity (which in truth is absolute security and protection in community with Jesus); out of the foreseeable and calculable realm (which in truth is unreliable) into the completely unforeseeable, coincidental realm (which in truth is the only necessary and reliable one); out of the realm of limited possibilities (which in truth is that of unlimited possibilities) into the realm of unlimited possibilities (which in truth is the only liberating reality). Yet that is not a general law; it is, rather, the exact opposite of all legalism. Again, it is nothing other than being bound to Jesus Christ alone. This means completely breaking through anything preprogrammed, idealistic, or legalistic. No further content is possible because Jesus is the only content. There is no other content besides Jesus. He himself is it.

“So the call to discipleship is a commitment solely to the person of Jesus Christ, a breaking through of all legalisms by the grace of him who calls. It is a gracious call, a gracious commandment. It is beyond enmity between law and gospel. Christ calls; the disciple follows. That is grace and commandment in one. “I walk joyfully, for I seek your commands” (Ps. 119:45).

“Discipleship is commitment to Christ. Because Christ exists, he must be followed. An idea about Christ, a doctrinal system, a general religious recognition of grace or forgiveness of sins does not require discipleship. In truth, it even excludes discipleship; it is inimical to it. One enters into a relationship with an idea by way of knowledge, enthusiasm, perhaps even by carrying it out, but never by personal obedient discipleship. Christianity without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship; and a Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without Jesus Christ. It is an idea, a myth. A Christianity in which there is only God the Father, but not Christ as a living Son actually cancels discipleship. In that case there will be trust in God, but not discipleship. God’s Son became human, he is the *mediator* – that is why discipleship is the right relation to him. Discipleship is bound to the mediator, and wherever discipleship is rightly spoken of, there the mediator, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is intended. Only the mediator, the God-human, can call to discipleship.

“Discipleship without Jesus Christ is choosing one’s own path. It could be an ideal path or a martyr’s path, but it is without the promise. Jesus will reject it.”

– From *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Discipleship: Reader’s Edition, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015, pgs. 18-20. Used by permission from the publisher.*

Weekly Questions

1. Bonhoeffer says that following Jesus is “truly not a program for one’s life which would be sensible to implement.” What do you think he means by that? What is the difference between following Jesus and following a program?
2. Are there things you have left behind to follow Jesus? Can you relate to Bonhoeffer’s claim that “the disciple is thrown out of the relative security of life into complete insecurity (which in truth is absolute security and protection in community with Jesus)”?
3. Bonhoeffer writes, “Discipleship without Jesus Christ is choosing one’s own path.” What does it mean to choose our own path? Are there paths we might choose for ourselves that seem good or moral, but that don’t focus on Jesus?