

## **“Let Down Your Nets” (Luke 5:1–11)**

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Who do you think you are?

That’s an important question. I don’t mean, what are you? The question of what human beings are is an important one, to be sure. But I have something far more personal in mind. Who are you? What is your identity?

The question of identity is an important one. It concerns how we think of ourselves and how we think of others. Think about what happens when you meet someone new. You start to identify that person by categories. We think of what a person looks like, his or her gender and age and looks, how that person is dressed, how they speak and act, and so on. When we get to know people, we often ask, “What do you do?” We mean, “What do you do for work?” or, “What do you do for a living?” That’s another way of identifying someone. We may ask, “Where are you from?” That, too, is a way of placing that person in a certain category.

The question of identity has also come front-and-center in many important political and cultural debates. The term “identity politics” addresses the issue of how people’s identity affects their politics. As far as I can tell, this began as an attempt to organize minority voices, which isn’t a bad thing at all. If, say, people who have a certain skin color and/or ethnicity aren’t getting their voices heard in the public square, it’s good for them to band together and make their views known. But what has happened is that now we pigeonhole people according to gender, skin color, religion, and sexual orientation, among other things. Instead of evaluating people according “to the content of their character,” as Martin Luther King put it,<sup>1</sup> we assume that if people are white male Christians, they must think this way, or can’t possibly have anything to say to that issue. It seems that instead of getting less prejudiced, we’re getting more prejudiced, putting everyone into camps before we even know what each person is really like.

Today, many people identify themselves according to their desires, and this creates new classes of people. People who are transgender have a biological sex, yet they self-identify as having a different gender, the one usually associated with the opposite sex. So, a transgender man is a biological woman who feels that she is a man. People who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream . . .” This speech was delivered in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963. The text of the speech is available at <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>.

identify themselves according to sexual desires. These identities are not rooted in biology, but only in desire. Imagine if you self-identified according to other dispositions, like pride, anger, lust, jealousy, and covetousness.

Our identities can also be based around our accomplishments or failures. We can find our self-worth in our jobs, our awards, our degrees, the amount of money we've made, or the way that people view us. Or, we can think of all the jobs we've lost, the awards we failed to earn, the degrees we never earned, the money we've lost, and the relationships we've lost.

What is your identity? Is it based on what you do for a living? Your political views? Your ethnicity? Your looks? Your desires? Your achievements? Your failures? When you think of yourself, what comes to mind? Who are you?

I ask this question because today we're going to look at a passage of the Gospel of Luke that deals with identity. We've been studying this biography of Jesus for about three months, and we've seen that Jesus has recently begun his public ministry. He has preached a message of God's kingdom and he has healed people. Now, he gathers some coworkers to himself. The story is rather simple: Jesus calls Simon Peter and a couple of associates to be his followers. They were fishermen, but Jesus gives them a new vocation: instead of catching fish, they will now catch people. (Don't take that literally—I'll explain what that means in a bit.) At the heart of this story is identity. Peter saw himself as a humble fisherman and, besides that, a sinful man. Yet Jesus summons Peter to take on a new identity. We might read this story as just a bit of religious history, but it's much more than that. Jesus is still in the habit of calling sinful people to himself, giving them new identities and new roles to play.

So, with that in mind, let's read Luke 5:1–11:

<sup>1</sup> On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, <sup>2</sup> and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.

<sup>3</sup> Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. <sup>4</sup> And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." <sup>5</sup> And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." <sup>6</sup> And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking.

<sup>7</sup> They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. <sup>8</sup> But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." <sup>9</sup> For he and all who were with him were astonished at the

catch of fish that they had taken,<sup>10</sup> and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.”<sup>11</sup> And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.<sup>2</sup>

As I said, the story is fairly simple, but I’ll give us a few details to explain. Jesus is at the “lake of Gennesaret,” which is another name for the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had been gaining a following, so there were people there who wanted “to hear the word of God.” Jesus’ words are God’s words. The crowd must have left little room for Jesus to preach. We don’t know exactly where Jesus was, but it was possible that he was at a location south of Capernaum where there was a bay that formed a natural amphitheater. “Israeli scientists have verified that this bay can transmit a human voice effortlessly to several thousand people on shore.”<sup>3</sup> To get an appropriate place to speak to this crowd, Jesus gets in a fishing boat and has its owner, Simon Peter, sail out a little way from the shore. Jesus then preaches from the boat.

Again, Luke doesn’t tell us what Jesus was preaching. We’ll hear a lot more of Jesus’ preaching as we go through the gospel. Luke is more concerned with what happens next. After Jesus finishes teaching, he tells Simon to try to fish. Now, we’re told that Simon and the other fishermen were washing the nets. This was probably a trammel net, which created a vertical wall of three layers of netting that caught fish. Because of the complexity of the nets, they needed to be washed after use. (I suppose the nets trapped weeds as well as fish.) The fact that the fishermen were washing the nets meant they were done fishing.

Simon’s response to Jesus in verse 5 is a bit skeptical, but it also shows his faith. He says, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing!” It’s as if he’s saying, “Jesus, why are you telling us to fish. We’ve been fishing for hours and haven’t caught a thing!” But Simon also says, “But at your word I will let down the nets.” Simon’s experience tells him he won’t catch anything. It doesn’t seem likely at all. But he also trusts Jesus’ word. In chapter 4, we saw that Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law by his word (Luke 4:38–39), so Simon knows that Jesus’ word is powerful. He may not realize who Jesus is yet, but he knows Jesus is someone he should listen to.

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>3</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 153. Edwards cites B. Crisler, “The Acoustics and Crowd Capacity of Natural Theaters in Palestine,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 39 (1976): 137.

So, Simon obeys Jesus, and when he does, he finds that Jesus was right. The nets catch so much fish that they start to break. In fact, the haul was so large that Simon has to call his partners, James and John, to bring their boat. And when the fish are divided between both boats, those boats start to sink. This is no ordinary catch. How did this happen? Well, Jesus is the God-man. It's possible that either he commanded those fish to be there at that exact time, or he knew they would be swimming by at that time and could be caught if only the nets were in place. Either way, this is a display of Jesus' power over nature.

When all the fish are in the boats, Simon doesn't worry about the damage to the nets or the fact that the boats may sink. No, he doesn't worry about that at all. Instead, he says to Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Why would Simon say something like that? Because he knows he's in the presence of the divine. He may not realize that Jesus is the divine Son of God, but he knows that Jesus is no ordinary man, and that somehow Jesus is associated with God. His response may seem strange, but it's perfectly natural, and fits a pattern that we see in the pages of the Bible. When the prophet Isaiah had a vision of the Lord, he said, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isa. 6:5). He realized he and his fellow Israelites had spoken sinfully. When the prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of God, he fell on his face (Ezek. 1:28). The same John in this passage, one of Jesus' specially-commissioned followers, had a vision of the resurrected Jesus. John reports, "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead" (Rev. 1:17).

Why do these people respond this way? They realize who God is. They know God is perfect. God is pure. And when we see God's holy, righteous, pure, perfection, we also see how very imperfect and impure and unrighteous we are. Who are we in comparison to God? If you were a fisherman, it would be intimidating to be in the presence of the world's greatest fisherman. But how would you feel if you were in the presence of the one who created fish? But it's more than that. Sin is a rebellion against God. And it's more than just bad choices. It's deliberately doing what is wrong. More than that, sin is a power that corrupts and contaminates us. It turns us away from God and turns us in upon ourselves, thinking that the world revolves around us. Only when we're called out of that inward gaze, when we face the very foundation of reality, the Creator himself, do we see the horror of our own sin. If we don't encounter God, we will never say, "I am a sinful man," or, "I am a sinful woman." We may, "Oh, I've made some

mistakes,” but that’s different. Mistakes can be honest or unintentional. But sins are crimes, violations of a holy God’s will. And until we see God for who he truly is, we’ll never understand the depth of our sin.

And unless we know the depth of our sin, we’ll never truly understand the depths of God’s goodness, mercy, and grace. Think of the way Jesus deals with Simon. Jesus already knows that Simon is a sinful man. And he never says, “No, Simon, don’t be so hard on yourself.” Jesus would agree with Simon’s self-assessment. But Jesus doesn’t condemn him. No, Jesus tells Simon and his partners, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” He actually says, quite literally, “from now you will be catching men alive.” This is a bit puzzling. Of course, it’s not meant to be taken literally. What Jesus means is that they had previously spent their lives catching fish. Of course, those fish would die and be sold for food. Jesus doesn’t mean they will hunt down people. What he means is that they will be gathering people for Jesus. They will go and tell others about Jesus, about who he is and the forgiveness that he offers sinful people. A couple of weeks from now, we’ll see Jesus respond to some Jewish religious leaders who question why he spends time with obviously sinful people. Jesus says, ““Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31–32).

How do Simon and his partners respond? Earlier, Jesus had told them to let down their nets, and they let their nets drop into the water to catch more fish. Now, they let down their nets—not to catch more fish, but to leave their old lives of fishing behind. They drop everything and follow Jesus. They trust his word and they follow him.

The passage is rather simple, but it’s profound. On one hand, we can see this as simply a bit of history. Jesus starts to call twelve men to himself. These twelve will follow Jesus, learn from him, see the miracles he performed, and then witness his death and resurrection. He happened to call some fishermen to join him, he performed a miracle to show them something of his identity, and they followed him.

But this passage reveals a paradigm: Jesus deliberately calls humble, sinful people to follow him. And those who follow Jesus trust his word and they leave their old lives behind. They have new identities and a new role to play in life.

And this is great news. Earlier, I said that we all have identities. Often, people identify themselves by their group, their people, their tribe, as it were. Everyone is labeled, and we even

label ourselves. These labels have to do with gender, age, skin color, ethnicity, where we grew up, our socioeconomic status. We put other people and even ourselves in neat little boxes. But that isn't liberating. It's suffocating. Why should those accidental properties define us? I can't control the fact that I was born in 1976 to a white family, that I have blue eyes, that I'm 6'2", that I have this set of genes, and so on. All those things are important parts of who I am, but why should they define me?

And why should our desires determine who we are? What if our desires are harmful? What if we desire things that are contrary to God's design for our lives? Our feelings shouldn't determine who we are. What if our feelings are eating us up? What if our feelings consist of anxiety and depression?

If we build our identity on past successes, what happens if we fail in the present, or in the future? What then? And what happens when we think of ourselves and all we think about are our failures? How can we get an identity that isn't destroyed by all the ways we've made a mess of our lives?

The same could be said of relationships. If we build our primary identity on our status as husband or wife, what happens if our spouse leaves us or dies? If our primary identity is mother or father, what happens when our kids don't turn out the way we hoped they would be, or what happens if, God forbid, they die?

What happens if we never had the family we wanted, the career we wanted, the life we wanted? How can we have an identity that is positive?

I want to press this home a little further. A couple of weeks ago I was talking to a wise, older friend. I was telling him about some recent difficulties that I've had. And I even told him that I've had a difficult time, emotionally speaking, over the last two years. I said that there was a point when I wanted to get out of my life. I wanted to stop being me. I wanted to hit the reset button, to start all over again, to be somewhere else, to be *someone* else. I remember telling friends that I felt like the opposite of King Midas. You may remember the story of King Midas: everything he touched turned to gold. I felt like every good gift that God had given me I turned to garbage.

Well, my friend said something very interesting. He said that being stuck with ourselves forever is hell. What he meant was that if we are stuck with ourselves and are not redeemed, not

saved, not transformed, then that is hell. To be unchanged and without hope, and to be stuck with our old identities, is a kind of hell.

Some of the most profound thoughts about personal identity have come from the great theologian Augustine. In his famous book, the *Confessions*, he talks about how he became a Christian. He first pursued a life of pleasure and non-Christian philosophies. Reflecting back on that time, he writes, “I had become to myself a place of unhappiness in which I could not bear to be; but I could not escape from myself. Where should my heart flee to in escaping from my heart? Where should I go to escape myself? Where is there where I cannot pursue myself?”<sup>4</sup> Over sixteen hundred years before I had these thoughts, Augustine had them first. Human nature doesn’t change.

Don’t all of us wish we were different? Maybe we wish we had a different family, a different career, a different station in life, or even a different body. This is what all of us feel. I’ve felt it. Augustine felt it. I’m sure you have, too.

When Augustine became a Christian, he realized the depth of his sin. He confessed, “My sin consisted in this, that I sought pleasure, sublimity, and truth not in God but in his creatures, in myself and other created beings.”<sup>5</sup> We were made for God, to know him, love him, worship him, and serve him. But instead of treasuring the Creator, we treasure his creation. Instead of loving the Giver of all good gifts, we make idols of the gifts and ignore the Giver.

If this is the human condition, where can we go for help? Where can we find hope? How can we get new identities? How can we be changed?

The good news is that Jesus offers us new identities. He offers us transformation. He offers us change. And, in the end, he will bring about that change.

But first, we must realize that we have sinned. And we must own that fact.

Last week, I read a fascinating little book called *The Riddle of Life*. It was written by a Dutch missionary named Johan Bavinck over fifty years ago and it was recently translated into English. This book dares to ask the big questions of life, such as, “Who are we?” and “Why are we here?” In the course of the book, Bavinck describes the nature of sin. He says, “In our hearts we carry a goodly number of passions, and we are loath to reveal these most intimate thoughts to

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 60.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

others, because we are well aware that they are not at all what they should be.”<sup>6</sup> Deep down, we know we have thoughts and desires that we should be ashamed of. And we all know we have done things we shouldn’t have. In short, if we’re honest, we know we’re not right.

But there comes a choice. Do we admit that we’re not right, or do we talk ourselves into thinking that we’re okay, or we’re not as bad as those people over there?

The proper response to an encounter with God is to own our sin, not to shift the blame. Bavinck addresses this issue, too. He writes,

As much as possible, we want to blame our shortcomings on others and on institutions outside us. We continually want to rid ourselves of all blame, while the only route to real salvation is that we fully own up to our guilt, admit that the emptiness dwells in our own soul. To put it differently: we are inclined to explain our suffering in such a way that we are victims of hostile powers outside ourselves. Our victim-obsession deprives us of the real incentive to essential conversion. Thus the first thing we have to do is to recognize that we are totally on the wrong track, that our lives completely lack a goal, that we ourselves are entirely to blame, and that the fundamental fault lies first of all within ourselves. Only then have we arrived at the heart of the matter.<sup>7</sup>

That quote is so very relevant for our world today. We cannot blame our sin on others, on outside forces or institutions. Yes, we may have been wronged by others. But we have wronged others, too. And we have to admit that we’ve not loved God or wanted to live life on his terms. Bavinck writes, “The real reason for denying sin is our constant effort to wrestle free from God and to resist his will.” In order to come back to God, we must first admit this and seek his forgiveness.

To know God is to know you’re a sinner. To know you’re a sinner is the first step to knowing the Savior. Jesus knows your sin. As God, he knows everything. Yet he still came and died for everyone who would simply trust him, who would run to him for refuge, who would come to him to find a new identity.

Jesus knew that Simon was a sinful man. Simon knew he had failed in life. He even failed at fishing. But what does Jesus say? “Let down your nets.” “But Jesus, we’ve fished all night and haven’t caught anything!” “Let down your nets.” “Jesus, get away from me, I’m a

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<sup>6</sup> J. N. Bavinck, *The Riddle of Life*, trans. Bert Hielema (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 66.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

sinful man. You don't know the things I've done." "Let down your nets." "Jesus, I can't be of any use to God. I'm such a loser." "Let down your nets."

Simon didn't have a lot of confidence in himself. But there's one thing he had. He had confidence in Jesus' words. So, at Jesus' word, he tried fishing again. And he found that Jesus was right. And after he confessed his sin to Jesus, he let down his nets. He left behind his life of fishing and became an evangelist, catching people not to die, not to be sold and enslaved, but so that they would have eternal life, and new identities. In fact, Simon was given a new identity and even a new name. In John's Gospel, when Jesus first meets Simon, he says, "'You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas' (which means Peter)" (John 1:42). Cephas and Peter both mean "rock."<sup>8</sup> In Matthew's Gospel, when Peter says that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:16–18). Simon went from a humble, sinful fisherman to being Peter, the rock, one of the first leaders of the church. He went from sinner to saint and son of God.

This wasn't because Simon cleaned himself up and atoned for his own sins. Jesus can call sinful people to himself and tell them that they will catch men alive, because Jesus allowed himself to be caught and killed. Though Jesus is the perfect Son of God, the God-man, the only person who has never sinned, he was treated like a criminal and an enemy of the state. He was tortured and crucified, killed in a brutal way. This was because sinful people hated him, but it was also God's plan. God made a way for sinners to have their sins punished when Jesus died on the cross. And God made a way for sinners to be clothed in Jesus' righteous status, receiving credit for his perfect life. This is a gift. We call this grace.

You can have this, too, if you trust Jesus' word. Do you trust that God can forgive you? Do you trust that you can be regarded as perfect, as clean, as sinless? God promised this in the new covenant, the terms for his relationship with his people: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34). Do you believe that is true? Do you believe that God can forgive you and cast aside all your failures? Do you believe that God is good enough that he would send his precious Son into the world to receive the penalty that you deserve? Do you believe that Jesus would lay down his own life to rescue yours?

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<sup>8</sup> Cephas is based on the Aramaic for rock and Peter is based on the Greek word for rock.

The Bible also says that the world is still broken, marred by sin. But one day Jesus will return to settle all accounts. He will right all wrongs. His people will be raised from the dead and receive new bodies that can never die. Do you believe that could happen? Do you trust that it will?

You may think this is too good to be true. You may not understand it all. But you can still be like Peter and say, “I don’t think this can happen, but because you say so, Jesus, I’ll trust you. I’ll follow you.”

You may not have to change your job like Simon Peter did. Letting down your nets may be leaving behind some old, destructive habits. We need to put sins to death. But that doesn’t mean we have to leave our jobs or our families.<sup>9</sup> We’ll all have to leave some things behind. Some of us will have more dramatic conversions than others. But we all need to change and we all need to be willing to follow Jesus, wherever he leads us and whatever he tells us to do.

Now, if you are a Christian, I want to leave us with two quick thoughts. The first is that we have a tendency to forget that our real, primary identity is in Christ. We can look back at our failures, or we can look to other things to give our lives meaning and purpose. But being a Christian means being “in Christ.” Our old lives are gone, and our new life is found in Jesus. When I was feeling depressed, when I felt like I was being attacked by forces of evil, I had to remind myself of the gospel. We all have to do that.

The second thought has to do with evangelism. Why does Jesus call fishermen? I suppose it’s because fishing requires hard work and patience. Fishermen have to be willing to go out, work hard, and get little for their labors. There will be days when they don’t catch much. And I suppose that’s a lot like evangelism. All Christians should be witnesses to Jesus. All of us should tell others about who Jesus is and what he has done. We can tell others about how Jesus has changed us. This requires many attempts. Some attempts won’t produce fruit. But we should keep trying. We might think, “Jesus, I can’t believe that person would ever put their trust in you. Jesus, I’ve tried already. Jesus, that person is too far gone, too bad, too stubborn, too angry.” But, still, we have to be like Peter, “At your word, I’ll try again.”

The only true good news that the world has ever received is that Jesus is the true King, the righteous ruler who comes to rescue his people. He lived the perfect life that we don’t live. He died a death in place of his people so that their sins are punished. He offers new life,

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<sup>9</sup> See 1 Corinthians 7:17–24.

forgiveness of sins, and new identities to those who trust in him. He promises that one day he will fix all that is wrong. There is no better offer out there. Please, take Jesus' offer. Let down your nets and follow him.