

# Passing the Discipleship Test

*Luke 5.1-10\**

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 31 July 2005

\* I am heavily indebted to Bill Hybels for his insights on this passage, given in an address at Willow Creek Community Church

## Introduction

When I was at law school I applied for a summer job at Chapman Tripp, one of the “big five” law firms in town. Along with scores of other ambitious young law students, I submitted my CV in the hope of an interview. I got one, was subjected to a thorough grilling by a couple of partners from the firm, was offered a position as a law clerk over the summer, and then for three months – with a few others – rotated around several different departments, given experience with commercial law, property law, and litigation. We spent the best part of a scorching summer sitting in a law office, researching case law, writing legal opinions, organising documents. Looking back, I realise now that the firm didn’t really expect us to make much of a contribution during that time. We hardly knew anything, and we still had a year of study to complete. What they were doing was exposing us to a whole range of situations to see whether we were the kind of people they would want to employ. Were we the kind of people who, with the right training and assistance, could make a contribution to that law firm? They were testing us.

That’s exactly what Jesus is doing in this passage here. He’s just commenced his ministry. He’s looking to recruit a team of people who will be his core followers, the twelve disciples. He doesn’t just recruit anyone. He wants a certain kind of person. The advance of his kingdom depends on who he chooses. So he decides to put Simon Peter and a few of his mates through some tests – at least four tests. Let’s look at them and see how we compare.

### 1. The “Bias for Action” Test (1-3)

For starters, it’s interesting to read in verse 1 that the longer Jesus talks to the crowd of people gathered by the lake, the larger the crowd grows. I’ve never had that problem. The longer I speak, the less interested people become. But for Jesus the crowd keeps growing until people are “crowding around him,” pressing in on him. So he decides to get into a boat and speak to the crowd from there. Now we know that Jesus was comfortable in boats. Several times you read about him sailing across the Sea of Galilee in a boat like this. He could easily have got into the boat and rowed himself out a little way, but instead he asks Simon Peter, “Will you put it out a little from shore?” Why? I wonder if it’s a test. You could call this the “Bias for Action” test. Jesus is testing his willingness to jump into action and help solve a problem. Does Peter have a bias for action? Is he available when called on to help? If Peter had responded by saying, “Solve your own problem. End your sermon early. Send the people home. I don’t want to get involved.” Or if he’d said, “Look, I’m washing my nets. I’m busy. When I’ve finished cleaning up, then I’ll help” it would have been a bad sign. But the passage implies that Simon Peter responded immediately and rowed the boat out. He passed this first crucial test.

I wonder if God puts this very test before you and me countless times every day. A colleague or class mate asks for help with a project. Someone’s car stalls by the side of the road. A child wakes in the middle of the night. How do you typically respond when confronted with a need? Do you jump into action and do what you can, even when it’s inconvenient? Are you available to being interrupted? In the Russian church there used to be certain people called “poustinikki” who devoted themselves to a life of solitude and prayer to God. But by custom they would leave the latch off the door as a sign of their availability to one another. It was a way of saying to their neighbour, “My priority at any time is your need.” Do you live with the latch off your door? During the recent series on the Sermon on the Mount, I asked the question: If you were to print on the front of a T-shirt your salt and light mission in the world, what would it say? One response I received said this: “To be there for Jesus.” Another one said, “To lend a helping hand for Jesus.” In other words, they were saying, “Just show me where I can help. I’m available. The latch is off my door.” That availability to serve others is a wonderful quality. Jesus looks for that in his followers. We’ll come back to it. Let’s go on to the second test.

### 2. The “Will You Follow Directions” Test (4-5)

You could call it the "Will You Follow Directions" test. After Jesus has finished speaking, he says to Simon Peter: "Put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch." The nets that Peter has just been cleaning after fishing all night and catching nothing. This is really interesting. Jesus is a builder by profession and now an itinerant preacher. He's hardly qualified to tell Peter, a professional fisherman, how to catch fish. And the type of nets that Jesus is referring to were made of linen and visible to fish during the day. That's why they were only ever used at night. So Jesus' command to go out and drop the nets in broad daylight is outrageous. That's what makes Peter's response so incredible. He says: "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything." He's honest with Jesus. "If we didn't catch anything during the night, we certainly won't catch anything during the day." But then he goes on to say, "But because you say so, I will let down the nets." That's such a powerful statement: "Because you say so, I will."

Last year a couple of wonderful ladies from this church had the idea of buying some movie passes for Lorraine and me to use whenever we felt we needed some time out. It was a lovely gesture, which we really appreciated. But along with the movie passes one of the ladies, Chris, gave us a babysitting voucher for use "whenever." It was her way of saying: "Look, if you ever want to go to the movies, and need a babysitter, just call me. If you ask me, the answer is always yes." Now that's pretty close to what Simon Peter says here. He struggles a bit, but in the end he says, "Because you say so, I will. You're my Master now. I'm committed to obeying your every instruction. So if you ask me, the answer is yes." You know, if Peter hadn't passed this test, I wonder if we'd know his name today. I wonder if he would have become one of the rocks on which the church was built. There was a lot at stake here. But because he said those words, because he passed this test, his whole future opened up. Here's the challenge for us this morning: Every time God's Spirit prompts you to do something, every time you sense him asking you to invest your time or talents or treasure in extending the borders of his kingdom, say "yes." It's okay to wrestle, like Peter, and say "But Master, I don't really want to help in the kids programme, or the youth ministry, or the worship team." The important thing is that you end up saying, "But because you say so, I will." Like Peter, you'll never regret it.

### **3. The "Who Deserves the Credit" Test (6-9)**

As soon as he and his mates obey Jesus and let down their nets, they catch such a huge haul of fish that the nets begin to break. They have to call their partners in the other boat to join them, but then both boats are so filled with fish they begin to sink. It's an extraordinary miracle. Have you ever asked yourself why Jesus arranged for this miraculous catch of fish? What was the purpose? Some scholars suggest it was all about money. Jesus arranged this miracle so that Peter and his companions could sell the fish at the market and the proceeds would then fund their travels with Jesus. I don't think so. I think it's more likely that this was another test: the "Who Deserves the Credit" test. Some of the crowd were probably still gathered on the shore when Peter and his friends bring in their huge haul of fish. I imagine Peter was tempted to start taking bows and doing photo ops and saying to the crowd, "Did you see that out there? Broad daylight. We're good." But he doesn't. Peter's response is amazing. He falls on his knees before Jesus and says in v 8: "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" It's a strange response, isn't it? But Peter is simply saying, "That was no lucky fluke out there. You arranged it. You deserve the credit for everything that just happened. And to perform a miracle like that, you're obviously from God. So you wouldn't want to hang around me. Because I know what God's like, and I know what I'm like. I'm selfish. I'm sinful. I'm not worthy of your friendship."

Do you see the irony here? Peter thinks that his sinfulness, his weakness, disqualifies him from being with Jesus and serving God. In actual fact, it's his confession of weakness that qualifies him to join Jesus' team. Being aware of his limitations he's likely to depend on God and to give him the credit. The great missionary Hudson Taylor said, "All God's giants were weak people." When God called Gideon to lead an army, when he called Esther to defy a king, when he called Mary to give birth to the Messiah, their initial response was never, "You bet. I'm up to the challenge. I think I can handle that." Their first response was just like Peter's. They recognised their need. They were, in the words of Jesus, "poor in spirit," which Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount is the number one quality that God blesses (Matthew 5:3). God is drawn to weak people, spiritually bankrupt people, who know they need to depend on him and will give him the credit. If you're struggling this morning thinking, "Jesus doesn't

really want me to close to him. I'm a sinful, selfish, unworthy person," be encouraged. In acknowledging that you pass the test. I like what Henry Blackaby writes:

Some people say, "God will never ask me to do something I can't do." I have come to the place in my life that, if the assignment I sense God is giving me is something that I know I can handle, I know it is probably not from God. The kind of assignments God gives in the Bible are always God-sized. They are always beyond what people can do, because he wants to demonstrate his nature, his strength, his provision, and his kindness to this people and to a watching world. This is the only way the world will come to know him.

#### **4. The "Grander Vision" Test (10-11)**

Let's look at one more test. Jesus poses one more test: the "Grander Vision" test. I imagine it unfolding like this: There's obviously quite a buzz in the air after this extraordinary catch of fish. Jesus says to Peter, James and John, "That was amazing, wasn't it? To catch all those fish and to do it as a team. The sense of achievement. Well think for just a moment a greater thought. You got a kick out of catching a bunch of scaly fish. Think what it would be like to catch men and women, to redirect the lives and destinies of hundreds and thousands of human beings. Wouldn't that be even more satisfying? Nothing against fishing. Just compare the stakes. Take a few dead fish to the market and you'll get a few dollars. But reach out to people with my love and you can redirect their destinies. Which is more valuable: a dollar or a destiny?" Peter and his mates answer correctly. Luke says "they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything, and followed him." They saw the grander vision. They passed the test.

I think God puts this "Grander Vision" test in front of us virtually every day. Tomorrow morning you're going to wake up and go to work or school or the supermarket or whatever it is you do, and the temptation is to get so completely engrossed in what you're doing that you lose sight of other people. I do. I realise I'm not really loving the people in front of me, not really seeing them as people who God loves, people for whom Jesus died. But Jesus says: there's a grander vision – altering people's eternal destinies. I've been reading a fair bit lately about Charles Colson. He was one of the politicians most deeply involved in the Watergate conspiracy that rocked American politics in the seventies. He went to jail for his part in Watergate, but underwent there a profound life change. When he got out of prison, Colson began devoting his life to helping men and women behind bars find freedom in Christ. This is what he writes: "I have experienced the most meaningful communion with God not in the lofty cathedrals of the world or in the great churches of our land, not under exquisite stained glass windows, but on my knees in a cell praying with men and women locked away in the horrid pits we call prison." Charles Colson got it. He sees the grander vision. It's about catching people and altering destinies. There is nothing quite like seeing someone's life transformed and destiny altered because God used you. Do you see it? Are giving yourself to it? That's a test we face every day.

Look at what God did through Peter, James and John because they left their nets behind and passed these tests. They started the churches that started the church that started the church that started the church that eventually started this church. We're meeting here because they were willing to pass that test. There's always a kind of multiplication in obedience that happens when you're prepared to pass these kinds of tests. So how are you going with these tests? The Bias for Action test? The Will You Follow Directions test? The Who Gets the Credit test? The Grander Vision test? What do you need to do in order to pass these tests? What do you need to leave behind? Think about that and tell Jesus your decision as we sing a song to close.

#### **Questions**

1. What was the most difficult test you have ever faced? What was it like at the time?
2. Do you have a "bias for action"? Are you "living with your latch off the door"? Do you know anyone who does? For a great example, see John 13:1-17.
3. In what ways are you facing the "Will You Follow Directions" test? What are the benefits of obedience (see John 14:21,23)?
4. What do you think Simon Peter meant when he said in v 8: "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"?
5. When have you been tempted to claim the credit for something God has done? "I think we ought to gather together each Sunday if for no other reason that to give God the credit for the life we enjoy." Do you agree? Does this affect how you view attending church?
6. Do you pass the "Grander Vision" test? Who do you admire as someone who has given their lives to catching people, altering destinies? Why? What practical steps could you take this week to become more like them?

