

# Are We Still a Life-Saving Station?

Matthew 4:12–25

## Introduction

On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude, little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves, went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little life-saving station. So it became famous.

Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and their money and their effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought, and new life-saving crews were trained, and the little life-saving station grew. Some of the members of the life-saving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots and beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully, and furnished it exquisitely because they used it as sort of a club [a country club].

Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The life-saving motif still prevailed in the club's decorations, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club held its initiations. About this time, a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in loads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin.

The beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where the victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside. At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities as being unpleasant, and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon life-saving as their primary purpose, and pointed out they were still called a life-saving station. But they were finally voted down and told if they wanted to save the lives of various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own life-saving station down the coast a little ways, which they did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old one. It evolved into a country club, and yet another life-saving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As told by John MacArthur, "Fishing for Men," recorded July 9, 1978, streaming audio, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/2195/fishing-for-men>.

That life-saving station bears a striking resemblance to what happens in churches. They often start out in the early days with a hunger and a thirst to save lives by introducing them to the life-saver, Jesus Christ. Yes, introducing non-believers to the sinless, perfect, Son of God is what we often call evangelism. It is the purest and truest work of the church. It is God's great concern, and it should be our noble task.

Life-saving evangelism is not just found in this text. It is woven throughout all of Scripture. God saturates His love letter to us with the importance of evangelism. Here is a sampling:

- Isaiah 6:8 – “And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here I am! Send me.’”
- Proverbs 11:30 – “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise.”
- Matthew 28:18–20 – “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”
- Romans 10:13–15 – “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’”

Real people will die a real death and enter into a real eternity. If you have never met Jesus Christ in salvation, you will enter into a real hell for a really long time—in fact, forever.

Our task, our duty, our privilege as believers is to go out on the life-boat and pull these people out of the seas of sin. Evangelism is the greatest concern in the mind of God; it is the greatest work in the life of Christ. Is it the greatest burden on your heart? Is it a driving force in your life?

Church, we must stop—we must stop dead in our tracks and begin to reevaluate our purpose. It is time for some healthy introspection.

**We cannot become a country club church. We must remain a life-saving station.**

Country club churches are marked by a few characteristics:

- They welcome people who are the same and are hesitant about accepting people who are “different.” It may look like everyone is of the same socioeconomic status, with the same values, the same lifestyle, or even the same race, etc.
- Their budgets give very little to outreach. They are quick to give money to minister to those who are already in the fold, but little to reach those without the fold.
- When something goes wrong, they complain to management.
- They are more apt to talk about their relationship with their church than their relationship with Christ.
- If you ask them, “Have you trusted Christ as your only way to heaven?” or “Do you know that if you were to die, you’d go to heaven?” they become intimidated and defensive.

**We cannot become a country club church. Country club churches are filled with country club Christians.** They have certain characteristics as well:

- Country club Christians believe membership means they have privileges and perks. They have paid their dues and they expect benefits. Church then becomes about what the church can give them.
- They show up when it is convenient to them.
- They mention what they’ve done for the church more often than they mention what they are learning from Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

**Transition:** We have to remain a life-saving station. We have to remain intense about sharing the gospel with people in our community. Let’s draw a few truths from this passage concerning evangelism.

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<sup>2</sup> Larry Moyer, “5 Characteristics of ‘Country Club’ Christians,” Ministry Today, March 26, 2015, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://ministrytodaymag.com/ministry-leadership/235-culture/21660-5-characteristics-of-country-club-christians>.

## 1. Evangelism will take place when we follow Christ (verses 18–22).

Jesus said, “I will make you.” You do not make yourself a fisher of men; God makes you. Jesus called two sets of brothers to be the first people on His rescue team. These men were actually very unlikely men to be chosen to begin His life-saving station.

Jesus picked his first followers from the city of Capernaum in Galilee (verses 12, 15, 18, 23). There were three important cities in the life of Jesus Christ:

- Bethlehem, because Jesus was born there.
- Nazareth, because Jesus was raised there.
- Capernaum, because Jesus set up His public ministry there.

Five of the twelve apostles were from Capernaum. The four in our text—Peter, Andrew, James, and John—were the first four out of the five. This city was big enough to have a public tax office where Matthew (the fifth) worked when Jesus called him to leave his profession.

Capernaum was a small but prosperous fishing village north of the Sea of Galilee. Galilee was the province (or the state) where the city was located. It is also interesting to note that eleven of the twelve apostles were from the province of Galilee.

Galilee was a melting pot for the nations of the world. The greatest roads of the ancient world passed through this province. It has been said, “Judaea is on the way to nowhere and Galilee is on the way to everywhere.” People were pouring into Galilee because of the economy. As a result, people from many nationalities came together and the entire “state” became like a mutt.

It is here at Capernaum, in the “Galilee of the Gentiles” (verse 15), that Jesus specifically set up His public ministry. One historian drew out the significance of this placement when he said,

It was not without reason that the Lord had indicated to Abraham that he must settle on this narrow strip of land that joined three continents. For thousands of years travelers from Africa to Europe, from Asia to Africa passed along the *via maris*, the ‘way of the sea.’ Right by the locale of Capernaum they passed, and they continued to pass by throughout the days of Jesus. By inaugurating His public ministry in Galilee of the Gentiles along the major international trade route, Jesus was making a statement. This land would serve as a springboard to all nations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *Understanding the Land of the Bible: A Biblical-Theological Guide* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1996), 11.

Jesus positioned Himself perfectly to receive worship from every kindred, tribe, nation, and tongue.

Jesus' life-saving station is in place, and now He is looking for rescuers. He chooses unlikely candidates. Galileans were commoners. Their cultural equivalent today would be the rednecks. Their distinctive accent was easily recognized by others. So here they are—these redneck Galileans, the first followers of Jesus. These are the chosen ones—really?

Jesus only had three years to get His message as far and wide as possible. What would He do? He would choose Galileans. No one would choose Galileans. I read an insightful perspective on what a corporation today would say of Jesus' choice of followers. Jordan Management Consultant Firm writes,

Thank you for submitting the résumés of the twelve men you have selected for management positions in your new organization. All of them have now taken our battery of tests and the results have been run through our computer. It is our staff's opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education, and vocational aptitude for the type of work you are now undertaking. They do not demonstrate a team concept. We would recommend that you search for persons of experience, managerial ability, and proven capability.

Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to an offensive temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership and he will remain anonymous. Brothers James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. Frankly, they are mama's boys. Thomas demonstrates a questioning, doubting attitude that would tend to undermine morale. We feel it is our duty to tell you that Matthew has been blacklisted by our greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau. James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus have definite leanings toward the radical scale.

One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, has a keen business mind, is good with finances, and is highly motivated and ambitious. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right hand man.

It is also interesting that Judas was the only disciple not from Galilee.<sup>4</sup> Flavius Claudius Julianus, a Roman emperor during the fourth century, called Christ the "Galilean God" and made a law that all Christians must be called Galilean. It was a term of contempt.<sup>5</sup> These Galileans lacked a lot of things, but one thing they had was obedience.

Christians historically have not held a high place in society. In A.D. 178, a pagan Roman philosopher named Celsus wrote these sarcastic words about Christians:

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood, ed., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 472.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Let no cultured person draw near, none wise and none sensible, for all that kind of thing we count evil; but if any man is ignorant, if any man is wanting in sense and culture, if anybody is a fool, let him come boldly [to become a Christian] . . . . We see them in their own houses, wool dresses, cobblers, the worst, the vulgarest, the most uneducated persons . . . . They are like a swarm of bats or ants creeping out of their nest, or frogs holding a symposium around a swamp, or worms convening in mud.

I guess we are frogs around a swamp or worms convening in mud this morning. Someone may say we have little ability or little to offer, but God chose you. You can say a lot about yourself, but you cannot say, “I do not have the ability to do evangelism. I am too weak. I have some social handicaps.” We must stop making excuses.

Do you know what you are really saying when you say you cannot do it? You are saying that the indwelling Christ in you cannot do it. Stop denying the power of Christ in you, and experience the power of Christ through you.

**Transition:** Evangelism will take place when we follow Christ. When we are not regularly engaged in evangelism, the logical conclusion is we are not rightly following Christ.

## **2. Evangelism will move you out of your comfort zone (verses 19–23).**

Watch these disciples being moved out of their comfort zone:

The Sea of Galilee was about eight miles wide and thirteen miles long . . . . Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, reports that during the time of Christ, about two hundred fifty vessels fished regularly on the waters of the Sea of Galilee. Not only was there fishing on the waters, but there was fishing from the shore as well.<sup>6</sup>

My cousin lives in Florida. It is always nice to have family living in the state of Florida. Unfortunately, my cousin lives in a redneck town in Florida. Actually, it is probably the redneck capital of the state. Whenever I am near, he is always wanting to go fishing on Lake Okeechobee. He usually builds the excitement up for about two days by telling me he has found a honey spot (a place with a lot of big fish). He usually tells me something very unrealistic, but at the same time very exciting like “the fish will just jump into the boat when we get to this spot.” Inevitably we go out with high hopes and return with shattered dreams.

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Davey, “The Master Disciple Maker,” Colonial Baptist Church, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://media.colonial.org/files/PDFs/CBC/The%20Master%20Disciple%20Maker%20Part%20I.pdf>.

I will usually tease him and say, “Man, do you know anything about fishing? I never catch anything when I go out with you.” He usually teases back and asks if I want him to leave me out there on the lake.

This lake in Florida is about ten times larger than the lake in Israel. However, the Sea (or Lake) of Galilee is about 120–155 feet deep, whereas Lake Okeechobee is only about 9 feet deep on average.<sup>7</sup> The Lake of Galilee was also different from Lake Okeechobee in “honey spots” too. People did not have bad days on this lake. God miraculously kept this lake stocked with fish. Just imagine over two hundred boats fishing this same pear-shaped sixty-four square miles of water.

You may find it interesting that there were three traditional ways of fishing the Sea of Galilee:

- A string and a hook. Peter once caught a fish this way in Matthew 17.
- A net was stretched out between two boats, and the boats would sail toward the shore, trapping the fish.
- A net was cast from the shore into shallow water with weights around the edges of the nets that made the corners sink faster than the middle.

The disciples, no doubt, were versed in all three ways of fishing. But now they were going to be moved out of their comfort zone and were going to be fishing for something different—people.

They did not have years of experience in this field. They did not “know the ropes” for this kind of fishing. They were stepping out into the unknown, but they were following someone who could be trusted.

**Where did following Jesus take these disciples?** Jesus took them throughout Galilee (verse 23). Galilee was about fifty miles north to south and thirty miles east to west. According to Josephus, there were about three million people residing in Galilee.

We have thirty-three of Jesus’ miracles recorded in Scripture. Most of them were in Galilee. Jesus took them to their neighbors. If you are following Christ, He will take you to your geographical neighbors.

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<sup>7</sup> J. I. Packer and M. C. Tenney, eds., *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 202.

## **Conclusion**

A call to follow Jesus is a call to step out of the boat. It is a call to launch out into the deep. It is a call to be uncomfortable. It is a call to love the favor of Jesus more than the favor of people. It is a call to be willing to be rejected so that others have an opportunity to accept Christ.

There are certain things we have to do as a church to make sure we do not become a country club:

- We need to guard our church calendar so people have enough time to live out their Christian life.
- We need to welcome the gifts and burdens of people in our congregation. What has God placed on your heart to do for evangelism? A book club? A children's Bible study in the park or at your home? Sports camps? And so on.
- We can invite our non-Christian friends to church. Most of the time, I will address non-believers in the audience openly like this: "I know that we have people in the building this morning that believe we are here because we need a religious crutch to get through life. I welcome you. I hope to show you that we worship not because we have social or emotional handicaps. We worship because sin has handicapped our access to God."
- We can reach into our networks of friends and invite them. Let's leverage our relationships for the gospel.
- We can be available for evangelistic training sessions like those we are going to have for the next three Sunday nights. We desire to have a well-trained life saving crew.
- We can read books and articles about evangelizing the lost to keep fanning the flames of evangelism in our hearts.



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