

## Historic Commentary

(Third Sunday in Epiphany - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

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### Commentary on Mark 1:14-20 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Mark 1](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Jerome](#): The sweetness of the apple makes up for the bitterness of the root. The hope of gain makes pleasant the perils of the sea. The expectation of health mitigates the nauseousness of medicine. One who desires the kernel breaks the nut. So one who desires the joy of a holy conscience swallows down the bitterness of penance.

[Origen](#): Now we can see how in a short time this religion has grown up, making progress through the persecution and death of its adherents and through their endurance of confiscation of property and every kind of bodily torture. And this is particularly remarkable since the teachers themselves were neither very skillful nor very numerous. For in spite of all, this word is being "preached in all the world," so that Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish now are adopting the Christian religion. Hence there can be no doubt that it is not by human strength or resources that the word of Christ comes to prevail with all authority and convincing power in the minds and hearts of all humanity.

[Tertullian](#): Do you hesitate about your business and professions for the sake of your children and parents? It has been demonstrated to us in Scripture that any too dear relations, crafts and trades are to be quite left behind for the Lord's sake. For James and John, called by the Lord, immediately leave quite behind both father and ship. Matthew is roused from the toll-booth. Even burying a father was too tardy a business for faith! None of those whom the Lord chose to him said, "I have no means to live."

[Augustine](#): And from that day they adhered to him so resolutely that they did not depart.... Let us, also, ourselves build a house in our heart and make a place where he may come and teach us.

[Jerome](#): There must have been something divinely compelling in the face of the Savior. Otherwise they would not have acted so irrationally as to follow a man whom they had never seen before. Does one leave a father to follow a man in whom he sees nothing more than he sees in his father? They left their father of the flesh to follow the Father of the spirit. They did not leave a father; they found a Father. What is the point of this

digression? To show that there was something divine in the Savior's very countenance that men, seeing, could not resist. Homily 83.

**Basil the Great:** A beginning is made by detaching oneself from all external goods: property, self-importance, social class and useless desire, following the holy example of the Lord's disciples. James and John left their father Zebedee and the very boat upon which their whole livelihood depended. Matthew left his counting house and followed the Lord, not merely leaving behind the profits of his occupation, but also paying no heed to the dangers which were sure to befall both himself and his family at the hands of the magistrates because he had left the tax accounts unfinished. Paul speaks of the whole world being crucified to him, and he to the world. Thus, those who are strongly seized with the desire of following Christ can no longer be concerned with anything pertaining to this life, not even with the love of their parents or other relatives insofar as this runs counter to the calling of the Lord.

**John Calvin:**

*Mark 1:14. Preaching the Gospel of the kingdom of God.*

Matthew appears to differ a little from the other two: for, after mentioning that Jesus left his own city Nazareth, and departed to Capernaum, he says: from that time Jesus began to preach. Luke and Mark, again, relate, that he taught publicly in his own country. But the solution is easy; for the words which Matthew employs, ἀπὸ τότε, from that time, ought to be viewed as referring, not to what immediately precedes, but to the whole course of the narrative. Christ, therefore, entered into the exercise of his office, when he arrived at Galilee. The summary of doctrine which is given by Matthew is not at all different from what, we have lately seen, was taught by John: for it consists of two parts, — repentance, and the announcement of grace and salvation. He exhorts the Jews to conversion, because the kingdom of God is at hand: that is, because God undertakes to govern his people, which is true and perfect happiness. The language of Mark is a little different, The kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the Gospel But the meaning is the same: for, having first spoken of the restoration of the kingdom of God among the Jews, he exhorts them to repentance and faith.

But it may be asked, since repentance depends on the Gospel, why does Mark separate it from the doctrine of the Gospel? Two reasons may be assigned. God sometimes invites us to repentance, when nothing more is meant, than that we ought to change our life for the better. He afterwards shows, that conversion and “newness of life” (Romans 6:4) are the gift of God. This is intended to inform us, that not only is our duty enjoined on us, but the grace and power of obedience are, at the same time, offered. If we understand in this way the preaching of John about repentance, the meaning will be:” The Lord commands you to turn to himself; but as you cannot accomplish this by your own endeavors, he promises the Spirit of regeneration, and therefore you must receive this grace by faith.” At the same time, the faith, which he enjoins men to give to the Gospel, ought not, by any means, to be confined to the gift of renewal, but relates chiefly to the forgiveness of sins. For John connects repentance with faith, because God reconciles us to himself in such a manner, that we serve him as a Father in holiness and righteousness.

Besides, there is no absurdity in saying, that to believe the Gospel is the same thing as to embrace a free righteousness: for that special relation, between faith and the forgiveness of sins, is often mentioned in Scripture; as, for example, when it teaches, that we are justified by faith, (Romans 5:1.) In which soever of these two ways you choose to explain this passage, it still remains a settled principle, that God offers to us a free salvation, in order that we may turn to him, and live to righteousness. Accordingly, when he promises to us mercy, he calls us to deny the flesh. We must observe the designation which Paul gives to the Gospel, the kingdom of God: for hence we learn, that by the preaching of the Gospel the kingdom of God is set up and established among men, and that in no other way does God reign among men. Hence it is also evident, how wretched the condition of men is without the Gospel.

For afterwards thou shalt catch men. The words of Matthew are, I will make you fishers of men; and those of Mark are, I will cause that you may become fishers of men. They teach us, that Peter, and the other three, were not only gathered by Christ to be his disciples, but were made apostles, or, at least, chosen with a view to the apostleship. It is, therefore, not merely a general call to faith, but a special call to a particular office, that is here described. The duties of instruction, I do admit, are not yet enjoined upon them; but still it is to prepare them for being instructors, that Christ receives and admits them into his family. This ought to be carefully weighed; for all are not commanded to leave their parents and their former occupation, and literally to follow Christ. There are some whom the Lord is satisfied with having in his flock and his Church, while he assigns to others their own station. Those who have received from him a public office ought to know, that something more is required from them than from private individuals. In the case of others, our Lord makes no change as to the ordinary way of life; but he withdraws those four disciples from the employment from which they had hitherto derived their subsistence, that he may employ their labors in a nobler office.

Christ selected rough mechanics, — persons not only destitute of learning, but inferior in capacity, that he might train, or rather renew them by the power of his Spirit, so as to excel all the wise men of the world. He intended to humble, in this manner, the pride of the flesh, and to present, in their persons, a remarkable instance of spiritual grace, that we may learn to implore from heaven the light of faith, when we know that it cannot be acquired by our own exertions. Again, though he chose unlearned and ignorant persons, he did not leave them in that condition; and, therefore, what he did ought not to be held by us to be an example, as if we were now to ordain pastors, who were afterwards to be trained to the discharge of their office. We know the rule which he prescribes for us, by the mouth of Paul that none ought to be called to it, unless they are “apt to teach,” (1 Timothy 3:2.) When our Lord chose persons of this description it was not because he preferred ignorance to learning as some fanatics do, who are delighted with their own ignorance, and fancy that, in proportion as they hate literature, they approach the nearer to the apostles. He resolved at first, no doubt, to choose contemptible persons, in order to humble the pride of those who think that heaven is not open to the unlearned; but he afterwards gave to those fishers, as an associate in their office, Paul, who had been carefully educated from his childhood.

As to the meaning of the metaphor, fishers of men, there is no necessity for a minute investigation. Yet, as it was drawn from the present occurrence, the allusion which Christ made to fishing, when he spoke of the preaching of the Gospel, was appropriate: for men stray and wander in the world, as in a great and troubled sea, till they are gathered by the Gospel. The history related by the Evangelist John (1:37-42.) differs from this: for Andrew, who had been one of John's disciples, was handed over by him to Christ, and afterwards brought his brother along with him. At that time, they embraced him as their master, but were afterwards elevated to a higher rank.

*And they immediately left the ship.*

The first thing that strikes us here is the power of Christ's voice. Not that his voice alone makes so powerful an impression on the hearts of men: but those whom the Lord is pleased to lead and draw to himself, are inwardly addressed by his Spirit, that they may obey his voice. The second is, the commendation bestowed on the docility and ready obedience of his disciples, who prefer the call of Christ to all worldly affairs. The ministers of the Word ought, in a particular manner, to be directed by this example, to lay aside all other occupations, and to devote themselves unreservedly to the Church, to which they are appointed.

*And Jesus went about all Galilee.*

The same statement is again made by Matthew in another place, (9:35.) But though Christ was constantly employed in performing almost innumerable miracles, we ought not to think it strange, that they are again mentioned, twice or thrice, in a general manner. In the words of Matthew we ought, first, to observe, that Christ never remained in one place, but scattered everywhere the seed of the Gospel. Again, Matthew calls it the Gospel of the kingdom, by which the kingdom of God is established among men for their salvation. True and eternal happiness is thus distinguished from the prosperity and joys of the present life.

When Matthew says, that Christ healed every disease, the meaning is, that he healed every kind of disease. We know, that all who were diseased were not cured; but there was no class of diseases, that was ever presented to him, which he did not heal. An enumeration is given of particular kinds of diseases, in which Christ displayed his power. Demoniacs (δαμονιζόμενοι) is a name given in Scripture, not to all indiscriminately who are tormented by the devil, but to those who, by a secret vengeance of God, are given up to Satan, so that he holds possession of their minds and of their bodily senses. Lunatics (σεληνιαζόμενοι) is the name given to those, in whom the strength of the disease increases or diminishes, according to the waxing or waning of the moon, such as those who are afflicted with epilepsy, or similar diseases. As we know, that diseases of this sort cannot be healed by natural means, it follows that, when Christ miraculously healed them, he proved his divinity.