

CHAPTER 1

EXTRA-Ordinary Choice

Every day of our life is filled with choices, some are very important, others are less so. The impact of the choices we make varies widely. Some are almost inconsequential, such as deciding what to have for breakfast or what to wear for a dinner reception, others have monumental consequences that affect us for the rest of our lives, such as choosing one's career path or picking a spouse. Speaking of choosing a spouse, I remember how difficult and scary the decision was for me and my wife (of almost thirty-two happy years now). It was difficult, not because we did not love each other, or because we doubted whether we were a good match. It was the gravity of the decision that overwhelmed us. The day after we got engaged both of us got a serious case of cold feet. Back in our respective parents' homes we each agonized over it—what have we done? Is this really the right choice? Choices can be very difficult and heart-wrenching. And Jesus was about to make a choice of eternal significance . . .

I CHOOSE YOU!

When Jesus started His ministry, He had to make some extremely monumental choices too. He had to choose a team of His representatives who would follow Him and, after His ascension, continue His work. This team of people would be commissioned to form the nucleus of the early church and prepare it to carry the good news of salvation to the whole world. In view of this colossal task, we would expect Jesus to be very careful, selecting only the very best, highly qualified, and extraordinary people.

However, astonishingly, Jesus chose the most ordinary and flawed people. The people He selected were broken and dubious men with serious character flaws who would be disqualified for important jobs in our world. They were simple people from various walks of life and different trades and experiences; most likely without any, or very little, formal education. A few were fishermen; one was a Roman tax collector—a broadly hated and resented occupation. Another one came from a

Radical Discipleship

banished rebel movement, always ready to pick a fight with the establishment; still another one was a financier who was so enthralled with money and profit that he ended up selling his Master to the enemy. You look at them, and can't help exclaiming, "What in the world was Jesus thinking about when He chose them, this hodgepodge of misfits?" Yet, this band of ragtag apprentices chosen by Jesus spent three and a half years inspired and guided by Him, and in the end was transformed into a people of God who formed the core of His early church. God was able to use these constantly struggling, doubting, and failing, ordinary people to produce the most extraordinary results.

Significantly, the number of the disciples reminds us of the twelve similarly flawed and imperfect sons of Israel, whom God used to form His chosen people in the Old Testament. Now Jesus had selected twelve equally defective and broken disciples to form His church, and He made a point of reminding them that He had chosen them, "You didn't choose me. I chose you" (John 15:16, NLT). But *who* were these chosen ones?

So, WHO QUALIFIES?

It is helpful to note the specific social honor pattern that permeated most every ancient culture. The honor system of the first century society formed a multilayer hierarchy in which each member of the society occupied a certain spot on the socioreligious ladder. The system strictly regulated relationships between individuals in social gatherings. Luke 14:8–10, where Jesus instructs His listeners not to take the highest place of honor in a banquet, is clearly indicative of this prevalent system. The same social structure naturally existed among the disciples. The hierarchy among them can be observed in the lists of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew 10:2–4; Mark 3:16–19; and Luke 6:14–16) as well as in the book of Acts (1:13), where they are presented in a consistent order, actually forming three distinct levels or circles of hierarchy.

Jesus, however, totally reversed the conventional values of social hierarchy and status. He turned the conventional norms upside down by introducing the kingdom principle of grace. Jesus taught that in order to be first we ought to be last, and if we are esteemed leaders in the eyes of God, it would be because we serve others. He had to teach the disciples a core lesson of equality in the kingdom: no one deserved it, and yet all were

EXTRA-Ordinary Choice

invited by grace. It was crucial for the disciples to understand that without Jesus they amounted to absolutely nothing, even when putting forward their very best efforts. But how can ordinary people become aware of such an extraordinary grace?

FROM ORDINARY TO EXTRA-ORDINARY

Luke and John team together to form an *inclusio* to make that very point, and it has to do with fishing. *Inclusio* is a “literary sandwich,” where a narrative begins and ends with the same element. Early on in his Gospel, Luke recounts the calling of the first disciples. Peter had been fishing all night with absolutely no results. They are now washing the nets, which means they are done for the night. Jesus unexpectedly instructs Peter to “let down your nets for a catch” (Luke 5:4). It is highly unusual because the nets are designed for night fishing and it is already broad daylight. Being a professional fisherman, Peter objects to the seemingly senseless command. However, in the end he relents, “*But* because you say so, I will let down the nets” (verse 5, NIV; emphasis added). And a miracle happens—they catch so many fish that their nets begin to break and the boats start to sink.

Oh, what an experience, what a miracle of God! To be made so successful that the very tools of your trade, whatever it may be, start breaking! Actually it must be rather scary because the success seems to be so explosive, especially in contrast with the fact that previously, in the absence of Jesus, your efforts were fruitless. That is the whole point of this aspect of the narrative. Your success does not depend on your tools and definitely not on your skills and know-how. Instead it depends entirely on the presence and action of Jesus Christ. In my life and ministry sometimes I’ve had to learn this lesson the hard way. It’s so easy to slip into an “I can” mentality, telling God, “I am the professional; I can handle this one by myself.” But these are the times that usually precede our biggest failures and then we learn to depend on Him.

Having experienced this amazing demonstration of power that has no other explanation than God’s intervention it suddenly dawns on Peter that he is in the presence of the Divine. And in God’s presence his own sinfulness becomes unbearably obvious to him and an almost imperceptible whisper escapes his lips, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (verse 8).

Radical Discipleship

This is a moment of great internal conflict. Because of his sinfulness, Peter feels totally unworthy to be in the presence of Jesus, yet that very Presence is the only thing that can cleanse his sin, so he falls at Jesus' feet. I am not worthy, but I need you! I am a sinful man, but please don't ever leave me! This is how in the palpable presence of Jesus a heart is transformed and reborn by the power of His love and grace. This is the place where the sinner can finally be himself and abandon the need to pretend to be better than he really is, fully trusting in the saving grace of God. Significantly, this is the place where Jesus calls His first disciples to transition from catching fish to catching men in order to help others enter the presence of Jesus, to have the same transformational experience of His love.

In John 21 we find the second part of the *inclusio*, where a similar story is recorded. Here, just like in Luke's narrative, the disciples have been laboring all night in vain but at the command of Jesus have such an enormous catch that they "[are] not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish" (verse 6). Once again, Jesus reminds them, and us, that He is the only One able to bring about the miraculous catch, whether of fish or humans.

Jesus did not choose these ordinary, flawed people by mistake. He was well aware of the monumental choice He was making, and He did not have cold feet about it the morning after. He chose these ordinary people for an unparalleled task because He was, and is, an extraordinary God! And He chose you too, as ordinary as you may feel. After all, radical discipleship is ordinary people *accepting* EXTRA-ordinary grace!

INDIVIDUAL OR SMALL GROUP STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why did Jesus choose disciples?
2. What qualified the twelve disciples to be chosen by Jesus?
3. How does extraordinary grace apply to us today?
4. When is a person considered a disciple of Jesus?
5. What was Jesus teaching the disciples, and us, through the two fishing miracles at the beginning and end of His public ministry?