

The King's Chosen People

The Servant King & the King's Servants: A Study in Mark 1-10 Sermon 7

Mark 3:13-21

October 30, 2022

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What's better, to choose or to be chosen? Modern people, especially Americans, love the freedom to choose. We rightly resist the idea of someone making all our decisions for us—telling us what's best for us. We like the freedom to choose; we like many options to choose from; and—even when we do make a choice—we like to keep our options open so that even our own choosing doesn't limit our freedom to choose.

This is one reason the continued success of the TV show *The Bachelor* is surprising—Now in its 27th season. The show does not, ultimately, appeal to the desire to choose. No. Its deeper appeal is to a desire to be chosen. To be found desirable and wanted...to be picked.

Personally, I prefer the NFL to *The Bachelor*. And in the offseason, I tune into the NFL draft. Here are the best athletes in the world. And their talents have afforded them opportunities—choices. So popular in high school, they chose to sit at whatever lunch table they wanted. So gifted in sports, they choose from an array of colleges recruiting them. Soon, with a pro contract, they'll choose whatever car they want.

But I can still remember in 2007, as the star quarterback of Notre Dame, Brady Quinn, sat there as pick after pick went by, and he wasn't chosen. The look of embarrassment and shame on his face. This great athlete looked almost small. *Why?* Because everything had come down, not to his choice, but to being chosen.

I also felt this—this tension between choosing and being chosen—when I was at seminary. Seminary is a big investment and doesn't necessarily send you into the most lucrative job market. I often asked my classmates: *why are you here?*

I was shocked when so many seemed less than clear: *"Well, I'm interested in learning more of the Bible."* *"I guess I chose to come because my dad is a pastor."* *"I'm really not sure, I went to Bible*

college, and this seemed like the natural next step.” Then there were people who said the opposite: *“I’d never in a million years choose this. God called me. God forced me. God has chosen me for this. I’d never do it on my own.”* These students had a totally different fuel in their tank.

Let me ask you again: *what’s better, choosing or being chosen?* For the deep needs of your heart, for the motivation of your hands, for your sense of place in life—what is better, this so-called freedom to choose, or the power of being chosen?

Our passage today recounts Jesus’ appointing of the Twelve Apostles in Mark 3:13-19. It sets before us a great divide between those who follow Jesus because they choose, and those who follow Jesus because they are called—chosen by Him.

I want us to look at this passage and better understand this biblical truth: It is better to be chosen by God than to falter in a so-called freedom to choose Him. And I want to draw out some implications from this.

I. The Doctrine of Election: *Why Christ Must Choose Us*

Before considering our passage, let us notice a theme in Mark that relates to it. That theme is how different people respond to Jesus. There are the religious leaders who ironically reject Jesus. Perhaps understandably, they’re offended by Jesus’ radical claims of making himself equal to God—claims to “forgive sins” (2:5), to be the “bridegroom” of Israel (2:19), and the “Lord of the Sabbath” (2:28). These leaders hold counsel “with the Herodians against Jesus,” plotting “how to destroy him” (3:6).

Then there are the crowds. These represent the average people. They are enamored with Jesus at this point in Jesus’ ministry: “amazed” by the way he teaches—with authority (1:27)—, thunderstruck by his power to exorcise demons (1:24-25), and utterly taken by his ability to heal: “the whole city was gathered together at the door [where Jesus was staying]. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases” (1:34).

Just before our passage, in Mark 3:7-12, we get a sense that Jesus is at the height of his popularity, with now a tremendous crowd—a “great multitude” (πολὸ πλῆθος) (3:7)—flocking from all over:

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him. And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him, for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him (Mark 3:7-10).

People are flocking to Jesus not just from Galilee, but from the south, “Judea and Jerusalem”; from “Idumea” (Edom), even further south; from the east, “beyond the Jordan;” and from up north, “Tyre and Sidon.” The only thing omitted is the West, because to the west lies the Mediterranean Sea. Mark hasn’t mentioned any ministry activity in those areas—they have simply “heard about all that Jesus was doing” (v.8).

We have to read verse 13 and what ensues in light of this growing following: “And he went up on the mountain and called to him those who he desired, and they came to him.” (3:13). Jesus withdraws from the large group of people following him, in order to constitute a small group of people, to follow him. *Why?*

Why not just leverage the crowd and the moment? Wouldn't we advise this? “Jesus, your polls are up, and your following is growing; this is the moment to leverage,” we might think. Instead, Jesus withdraws and calls a small group—just twelve out of what must have been tens of thousands. *Why? What does this tell us?*

Jesus is drawing a distinction between those who choose him and those who are chosen by him. In this sense, he is showing us how the kingdom of God must be built. The crowds represent our human impulse to flock to things because we like them, find them interesting or entertaining; or things we can gain from them. These people were coming to Jesus for the healings—that’s why it says in vs. 8, “the great crowd hears all that he was *doing*, and they came to him.”

Think about the phrase for a moment, *"I like it."*¹ This is often reason enough for why we choose things—from food to jobs, to houses to spouses. But just as easy as it is for us to say, "I like it," is for us to say, "I don't like it." And in our individualistic world, the phrase "I don't like it" is a logically airtight argument for rejecting everything from vegetables to marriage—for deciding to do away with an old outfit or do away with our religion.

If Jesus' following is built by this modern phrase—*"I like Jesus, that's why I follow him"*—then Jesus isn't actually leading anyone. Jesus is simply following the fancy of the people. He becomes beholden to their desires and wishes. But if, on the other hand, Jesus turns from our affections to his authority, the community of followers he builds is built upon a totally different foundation.

So, in verse 13, Jesus turns to tables: "And he went up on the mountain and **called** to him those who he desired, and they came to him." (3:13). He called. They came. And this makes all the difference. The word "called" used in verse 13 signifies a very important idea in the Bible. It's the idea of God choosing people for Himself.

- In the Old Testament, Israel is referred to this way: "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has **chosen** you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Deuteronomy 7:6).
- As the Church is born in Acts 2, Peter refers to its members this way: "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God **calls** to himself." (Acts 2:38-39).
- Jesus says in John 6: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44).
- And Jesus reminds his disciples in John 15: "You did not choose Me but I chose you" (John 15:16).

These various terms—chosen, called, being drawn—all convey this truth: **fallen human beings only come back to God if and when God chooses and calls them.**

Now at once, someone will object: “this is a violation of my free will, of my right to choose.” To you I would say, along with the incontrovertible sense of the Scriptures we’ve just read, we need to understand something deeper about this teaching.

The Bible is not saying that humanity was created with no possibility to come to God—no, they were created in and for relationship with God. And the Bible is not saying that humanity was not made free to choose, come to, and love. What the Bible is saying, is that in humanity’s current state, they are *unable* to come to God.

One writer compares fallen humanity to a bird with a broken wing. The bird is ‘free’ to fly, so to speak but is unable to do so. Likewise, “the natural man is free to come to God but not able.”² We have a “broken wing,” so to speak, that prevents us from flying to God, our refuge and strength, and it manifests in several ways. I’ll remind us of three.

1. Darkened Minds

The Bible says we have “darkened understanding” (Romans 1:21, 28). “The natural person,” Paul says, “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God...he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). Show to any natural person the great vistas of creation, a mountain range, a starry night sky, the ocean depths, and they are quite able to see and marvel at the beauty. But try to show someone the beauties of the Trinity, or the Incarnation, or the death of the Son of God for their sins, and they cannot understand these things. Their response is in no way appropriate to the greatness of these objects. *Why?* Because the natural man cannot understand them. A color-blind man can no more choose his favorite hue of orange than a spiritually blind man can choose to come to God. *How can someone choose God and come to God if they cannot see and understand God?*

2. Hardened Hearts

Neither can we rightly desire God. Along with darkened minds, the Bible says we have hardened hearts. Our desires run all over the place—they don’t want what they should want to the degree they should want it. You wonder if this is so? *Why*, on Sunday mornings, are not the people of Washington lining up to get into church to praise God? *Why* are most sleeping? *Why*, even as we gather, are our hearts often unmoved? We don’t desire prayer. We don’t find sweet the Word of God. We don’t miss

the presence of Jesus. Our desires instead burn for the things that pass away and are cold towards the things that last.

John, in his first letter, says that “the lusts, desires, of the world are passing away” (See 1 John 2:17); Jesus says “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life” (John 6:27). We cannot come to God because we don’t desire God.

Some might think that if we managed a bit of understanding about God, and a taste of His goodness, we’d have made our way to the summit. But even here, we’d look up only to see an even greater peak: *the bondage of the will*.

3. Bound Will

A person is free to come to God if they will. But oh, how our wills are in bondage. Augustine wrote of this problem in his *Confessions*. He explains that his previous actions had forged a ‘chain of habit’ in which he was held fast. Held fast “not in another’s shackles, but in the iron links of my own will.”³

In the Apostle Paul’s words: “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.” (Romans 7:18). *Why can’t we choose God, come to God, and love God, based on our own choosing?* Paul sums it up best in Ephesians 2:1. We are “dead in our trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1).

So why, with tens of thousands of people choosing Jesus, does Jesus take aside just a few to announce that he has chosen them? Because, as we read in John’s Gospel: “Jesus ... needed no one to bear witness to him about man, for he himself knew what was in man” (See John 2:23-25).⁴ Jesus knew that the kingdom of God would not be built upon the affections, likes, interests, or choices of men and women. No, it would be built by the sovereign, authoritative, irrevocable call of God: “And he went up on the mountain and **called** to him those who he desired, and they came to him.” (3:13).

There is a qualitative difference between following Jesus because of your attraction to Him; versus following Jesus because of his authoritative call upon you. More important than our choice to follow Jesus is the fact that Jesus has chosen us. This truth impacts us in several ways, both individually and communally.

II. Implications of the Doctrine of Election: *How Christ's Choosing Impacts Us*

1. Comforts

Christ's choosing of us is comforting. It is so because he chooses not based on our merit, but out of his mercy and grace. Exhausted is the man who believes God's choice of him depends daily on his deserving of it. When Jesus calls us and chooses us, he reaches across all unworthiness and takes us by the hand. *And to what end?* Verse 14, "so that we might be with him" (3:14). To be a follower of Jesus, you don't need to be great, you just need to be chosen.

2. Secures

Christ's choosing is also comforting because it secures. Jesus says in John 10, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me ... and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28). Think of these twelve apostles. They falter. They fear. It is Christ's hold upon them that secure them over their lives. He who chooses you also holds onto you.

3. Challenges

Christ's choosing of us also challenges. It challenges because it reminds us that Jesus is not democratically elected. He does not depend on our vote, our choice. Just as Jesus did not need our permission to create us, he does not need our permission to save us. He acts with total authority when he calls us.

For the believer, are you relating to Christ only in those areas where you have "elected" him—only where his ways meet your preferences? That is not what it means to be called and chosen by him. He has elected you; you did not elect him.

For the non-Christian, perhaps the person who isn't religious at all: do you see the limits of your own choices? Do you know, where in fact, you aren't choosing at all? Do you see those places in your life where forces other than your free will—pressures, your family of origin, your need to be liked, your fear of failure—are actually choosing you? What vision of the good life has chosen you? What vision of happiness do you currently follow and live for? Are you so free in your great freedom to choose?

Perhaps, the idea of your Creator choosing you through the gift of his son, would mean something to your heart?

4. Unites

Finally, Jesus' choosing unites—it forms a people. It unites because when Peter is chosen to be with Jesus, Peter is also chosen to be with James—and John, and Thomas, and Philip.

The people of God are not founded by their own preferences, but by the call of God. Not even our religious preferences for music, or liturgy are what finally unites us. Not even our good-hearted passion for evangelism or justice is what unites us. Friends, not even our affection for Jesus is what ultimately unites us. What ultimately unites us is Jesus' choosing of us. Jesus' community is bound together by Jesus.

And Jesus doesn't build communities around natural friends. Sometimes he does so around natural enemies. Think of Matthew the tax collector: a pro-roman sellout. And think of Simon the Zealot: a hyper-nationalist. Not natural friends, these two. But in Jesus, brothers. Friends, we must treat one another in a way that reflects God's choosing of them. And we must recognize that God has chosen for us to be together, for reasons that are good.

What's better, choosing or being chosen? What's better for your heart's relationship with God—your choice of one religion out of many? Or the living God's sovereign choosing of you? What's better for your motivation to serve Jesus? Your choice to find his mission interesting, or his choice to send you into it? What's better for our church community? Our natural affinity for liturgy or music or each other? Or God's sovereign choice to call us to one another?

“Jesus went up on the mountain and **called** to him those **whom he desired**, and they came to him” (Mark 3:13). And friends, on the foundation of the Savior's choice, these frail and normal men went on to become the foundation of the church.

Endnotes

1. I owe this example to Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist, who used it in a sermon.

2. God's choosing, or "election," of people can be a hard teaching to understand. In Anglican Theology, it is expressed in Article 17 of the 39 Articles: **XVII. Of Predestination and Election:** *Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour. Wherefore, they which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God be called according to God's purpose by his Spirit working in due season: they through Grace obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sons of God by adoption: they be made like the image of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ: they walk religiously in good works, and at length, by God's mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity. As the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal Salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God: So, for curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's Predestination, is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the Devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation. Furthermore, we must receive God's promises in such wise, as they be generally set forth to us in holy Scripture: and, in our doings, that Will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared unto us in the Word of God.*
3. Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII, v, 10; On Augustine's view of the will, see also Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 166-67.
4. The full verse demonstrates that Jesus did not build his kingdom on man's impressions about him: "23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man" (John 2:23-25).