

“Five Steps to Takeoff”

Mark 1:14-20

14 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15 “The time has come,” He said, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

16 As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fisherman. 17 “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” 18 At once they left their nets and followed Him.

19 When He had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. 20 Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Him.

One of my all-time favorite movies is “Top Gun” the movie about jets that starred Tom Cruise, Meg Ryan, Val Kilmer, and Kelly McGillis. Then not too long ago they had a sequel titled Maverick that was also good. Those of you that have seen the movie, think back. Remember, if you can recall, how the jets took off and landed on the aircraft carriers.

These sleek, large, million dollar jets sit on an even bigger more expensive ship. In order for both pieces of equipment to function without disaster, a bond of complete trust and genuine teamwork must be established between those who pilot the jet and those who remain on the ground. Those trained to pilot the most powerful and sophisticated aircraft in the world must rely upon and wait for a series of “go-ahead” hand signals from their always-grounded “air-boss.” Each step must be carried out in proper sequence before the big jets can set off on their appointed missions. Today I want to draw a comparison between the pilot and “air boss” preparation for takeoff and the communication and preparation before Jesus sends out His disciple.

1)The first duty of the airboss is to signal the removal of the “chocks,” the small wedges that lock in place the aircraft’s wheels and keeps them from rolling. The hand signal for removing the chocks is to put your fists together, pinkies touching, four fingers facing you and thumbs pointing out. Suddenly thrust each fist in the opposite direction of the other.

The chocks have the same function on the aircraft carrier as do the blocks that you see placed under the wheels of commercial aircraft. These simple chocks are about as basic and unsophisticated a piece of equipment as you will ever see—little more than glorified doorstops. But they serve a major purpose. By jamming the wheels, the chocks

make it impossible for the big jets to roll. It stops them from moving. One simple block can completely halt the progress of tons of machinery worth millions. Without the airboss' signal to remove the chocks, the flight will never get underway.

When Jesus utters his first proclamation of the Good News, that “the kingdom of God has come near” in verse 15, He follows it with the command to repent. Before anything else can happen, even before he urges listeners to “believe the good news,” Jesus preaches repentance. Jesus knows that our sins and shortcomings, prejudices and preconceived notions can effectively block us from making any headway in our search for God’s kingdom. Even if they are seemingly ridiculously small matters of attitude or style that appear to be nothing to most people, like the small seemingly insignificant chocks, they can stop everything. Small matters or sin, little white lies, just a little deceit, not telling the whole story, sliding those barbs in there in our speech, cutting others down, arrogance, pride; they all can stop us from reaching out and “believing” in the power that the gospel offers over sin and death. Like those chocks jammed under the tires, unconfessed sin can cause a block or wall to go up between us and God. The jet can’t takeoff and you and I can not grow in our relationship with god until we confess our sins and repent which means to change one’s mind and turn 180 degrees in the other direction. Turn and walk back to God. No RUN! You can’t get anywhere with the chocks of unconfessed sin in your life. Before we can even hope to begin our journey into discipleship, these “stumbling blocks” must be removed and genuine, sincere, repentance is an absolute necessity

In the 3rd and 4th centuries, especially in Germanic areas, it became customary for men to disarm themselves before entering the sanctuary of the church for worship. The bulk of these weapons were simple wooden clubs—not elegant, but effective as protection against highway bandits and wild animals. Thus, it became common for the back of the church to fill up with a pile of wooden clubs as church began.

Gradually, congregants developed a kind of game associated with this practice of leaving these signs of animosity and violence behind them. After the services, while the women talked, the men would collect all these clubs, pile them together and compete among each other to see who could knock down the most clubs as possible by rolling stones at them. The more clubs knocked over, the more sins the individual was said to have left behind.

Eventually this contest became more intentional and organized, ultimately developing into a pile of nine clubs or “pins” arranged in a rectangle. Knocking down sins turned into a much anticipated past-time on Sunday afternoons. By the time of the Reformation it was very popular and was said to be Martin Luther’s favorite sport. Luther loved the symbolism of Christians as “holy bowlers” enthusiastically bowling

over all the sins that kept them from seeking God's fullness and fulfillment. When bowling made its way to the United States, it quickly lost all of its religious pedigree and became an exercise in gambling. This caused some states to ban "nine-pin" bowling. But some bright bowler got the idea of replacing the nine-pin rectangle with the ten pin triangle, got rid of the gambling, and voila we got the modern game of bowling.

What holy bowling do you need to keep your life from being grounded like a jet with the chocks still in place? What wrong thoughts, attitudes, and/or actions need to be removed so they don't keep you from going where God is calling you to go? Release the chocks and blocks from your life. (Make signal) Repent and believe.

2) The second duty of the airboss is to walk around the plane, listen carefully to the noises on all sides, judge the vibrations of the plane, and signal the pilot when the engines sound ready. The airboss does this making an upward spiral motion of the hand – like a twister. This signal means that the engines, screaming to life, sound strong and safe, ready to propel the plane/jet down the runway when the time is right.

Vibration comes before vision. We must hear the call of God before we can see the calling. Jesus first heard His Father's call to Him; then He saw His calling as the Messiah. Jesus then sounded forth the call to His disciples, and those who had ears to hear, they heard it. Like the airboss' spiral gesture, Jesus proclaimed a spiraling moment in time—a Kairos moment when time is both "fulfilled" and yet "coming near." Kairos time, unlike chromos time, does not proceed in a neat linear motion. It is much more like that spiraling gesture used by the airboss. The pent-up power in a spiral, a tightly wound spring image, is infinitely greater than the tautness of a straight line. Straight-line winds can cause a lot of damage but the most powerful winds ever recorded on earth don't blow across the top of a mountain or across a field. They scream in circles of the giant cyclones that appear and then disappear over "tornado alley" in the Midwest. In these spirals, winds speeds of over 300 mph have been recorded.

The kingdom of God which Jess repeatedly describes as BOTH "now" and "not yet," continues to be present for us today in the spiraling kairos time it inhabits. Living in the tension of this coiled power, Christians should be able to feel both the power of God's presence and the pull of worldly conflict. Like the pilots of those aircraft, we sit perched on a seat of tremendous power—but we, too, must wait for the next signal before getting fully underway ... taking off if you will.

Now we come to the third signal. After the engine is revved up and ready, the airboss next looks into the cockpit of the plane and asks if the pilot is ready. Now that the vibrations are accounted for, the question is vision. First it has to sound right, then comes the vision part. Can the pilot see his way forward? Is the pilot prepared? Are his

instruments working? When the airboss finds a spot where he can establish a visionary relationship with the pilot, (meaning he establish eye contact), he makes a “thumbs-up” signal—a signal which the pilot must return so that the airboss know the pilot has seen him and that the instruments and pilot are fully ready to go. The “thumbs-up” sign illustrates the pilot’s confidence, the pilot’s faith in the airboss’ expertise and guidance, and the aircraft preparedness. There has to be a high level of trust.

Before Jesus calls his very first disciples, he is already calling people to faith. Faithfulness is the Christian’s “Thumbs-up” sign. We have no way of knowing if the course ahead of us carries smooth air or turbulence and storms. We have no special foreknowledge if the skies will be friendly or filled with hostility and danger.

What we do have is faith—faith in the love of Christ, faith that Jesus will keep His promise to never leave us or forsake us, faith in the eternal closeness of God and His kingdom. Jesus proclaims that the correct response to the gospel news is faith. He gives us the “thumbs-up” sign of trust in God’s grace and faithfulness to us.

The fourth signal given by the airboss goes beyond the mechanical, beyond the status of the equipment. In order to remind the pilot of the significance of the assigned mission—of the life and death possibilities that lie behind every takeoff and landing—the airboss offers the pilot a formal salute. This salute is a serious gesture, a somber moment in the procedure. There are dangers known and unknown that accompany the mission, no matter how routine any mission may appear. By saluting, the airboss reminds the pilot of the seriousness of the venture and elevates what may be a routine into a significant moment.

Jesus called his first disciples not only to learn at His feet but to join Him in offering the world the saving message of the gospel. This is truly a mission of life or death. The gospel has the power to save—to “rescue the perishing”—but only if those called to discipleship understand the nature of their mission and choose to accept. Sharing the gospel is a call, an order, we should take very seriously.

The final gesture the airboss makes sends the waiting jet and pilot off into the sky. This gesture is the grandest of the lot. For now that everything is ready for takeoff, the airboss must do one more thing. Can you guess what it is? GET OUT OF THE WAY! The airboss takes a giant step to the side, then makes a grand forward-pointing gesture with his whole arm. The airboss points the pilot off the flight deck, into the direction of the carrier’s mission. It is the airboss’ sendoff that signals the sending of the pilot out into the sky/world.

Can we let go and let God take us out into the world? Can we let go and trust God enough to lift us into the stratosphere of spirituality and service? Can we get out of the way and let God be Lord in our lives? Jesus pointed the disciples in the way that they

should takeoff. Jesus gave them and He gives you and I our mission. Our mission here on earth is to glorify God. Now do that by doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. We do that by loving the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind. We do that by loving our neighbor as ourselves. That means we have to love ourselves appropriately as well. To glorify God we must go into all the world 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 obey everything that Jesus has commanded. That is our mission!

Get rid of the chocks—confess your sins and repent and believe. Your engines are ready—you have a relationship with your creator. I salute the seriousness of your task—it could mean the difference between life or death—eternal life in paradise/heaven or an eternity of suffering, being separated from God. I send you out into the world to make a difference! (Do the motions one more time in silence). Let's pray... AMEN

**Sermon Notes for “Five Steps to Takeoff” sermon on Mark 1: 14-20 given at
Doster Community Church on August 3, 2025**

- I. This morning I am making a comparison between the relationship between pilot and airboss on an aircraft carrier and the relationship between disciple and Jesus.
- II. First air-boss to pilot signal is for the removal of the chocks. Without the airboss signaling the removal of the chocks the flight cannot get underway. In the same way we are called by Jesus to repent and believe. Without repentance and belief the disciple cannot get underway.
- III. Second signal is spiral with one hand like a twister which tells the pilot that the engines sound ready. Vibration comes before vision. We must hear the call before we can see what we are called too. Jesus’ timing is always **perfect!**
- IV. Third signal is thumbs up sign that both pilot and airboss must see and acknowledge. When pilot gives thumbs up his technology says jet is ready and he is ready and illustrates the pilot’s confidence or faith in the airboss’s guidance. Faithfulness is the Christian thumbs up sign. We must have faith in the love of Christ.
- V. Fourth Signal is a formal salute to remind pilot of the significance of the assigned mission. Jesus called His first disciples not only to learn under Him but also to go and offer the world the saving message of the gospel. They count the cost.
- VI. Final signal is to get out of the way! The airboss takes a giant step to the side and makes a grand forward-pointing gesture with his whole arm. Can we let go and get out of the way so Jesus can work in us and through us to make a difference in the community ... in the world?