

## Sermon- What Does it Take to Follow Jesus?

NT: Matthew 4: 18:22 <sup>18</sup> As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. <sup>19</sup> And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” <sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup> Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

We see that when Jesus started choosing his disciples he went up to several fisherman and said Follow me, and it says they *immediately* left their nets and followed him. We also see in scripture people asking how or if they could follow Jesus and how they could inherit the kingdom of heaven and to them Jesus gave varying responses. To one rich man Jesus told him to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor and then follow him. To another who said he must bury his father first before he followed Jesus, Jesus said let the dead bury the dead. And to another who said that he would follow Jesus wherever he went, Jesus replied that “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”.

So we have a mixture of people immediately following Jesus and then some giving excuses why they can't follow Jesus right now or maybe they don't really have it in their heart to follow Jesus and he knew that. When we look at the fisherman, they had a hard way to make a living. It wasn't that they couldn't make a living by fishing, but they lived in a time when Israel was under Roman occupation which meant that they had heavy taxes levied against them. And they were levied not just by the one government entity but they had layers of government who all extracted their own taxes from the fisherman. So they were probably in the hole financially before they set out to fish for the day. And then being a fisherman was not an easy job, they had

to work long hours and after all the taxes they had to pay to the various authorities they made very little for themselves. This is a reason why Jews who worked for the Roman government as tax collectors were so hated, because they were helping the various government entities extract so much money from the Jewish people that the Jewish people had little left over for themselves. And of course the tax code was not easily understandable, just like it's confusing today, so the tax collectors were known to cheat the people they collected taxes from by collecting more than needed and keeping the excess for themselves.

So for the fisherman to follow Jesus, they weren't walking away from a life filled with luxury like the rich man would have been. When Jesus told the rich man to sell all he had and give the money to the poor so he could follow Jesus, it says the rich man went away sad. So it was much easier for the fisherman to walk away from their life than the rich man. But we also have to consider they may have had families they had to walk away from also. We know that Peter had a mother in law and we know that James and John left their father Zebedee in the boat to follow Jesus. So although the fisherman's lives may have been easy to walk away from, they had to leave family as well.

When I read this passage I find myself a little uneasy, because I often wonder which of those people I would have been in the story. Would I have been like the fisherman who immediately followed Jesus, or would I have made excuses or been unable to part from my material possessions to follow Jesus. I don't know if any of you ever do this same thing, comparing your current day circumstances to things that you read about in the Bible, or even other historical accounts that you read about that may not be from the Bible. I often ask myself, had I been faced with that situation, would I have taken the right action. Had I lived in Jesus time, would I have immediately followed Jesus or used my lists of things as an excuse because I

needed to get them done first? Had I lived after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection when Christianity was new and Christians were being fed to the Lions would I have had held fast to my faith and accepted this death? Or even more recent history, I often wonder and really hope that my person at any point in time would be on the right side of history and more importantly the right side of the kingdom of heaven.

I tried to find a term that define when we compare ourselves today to past circumstances or if there was a term that defined a study of this but I couldn't exactly find it. I found the terms schema congruence, false equivalency, analogy fallacy, but none of these fit exactly to what I was looking for. Then I thought about hermeneutics, which again doesn't fit exactly but is a method of interpreting bible passages by looking at the text in a variety of ways, such as historical context and what were acceptable customs and culture values at the time to name a few.

But my point for thinking about whether or not there was a defined term for this was to say that maybe I shouldn't nor should anyone else try to compare ourselves in based on our lives today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to what we might have done during a completely different time in history. At least I know I shouldn't allow myself to feel uneasy by this comparison. But I do think when we read passages like this and ponder how the fisherman could just immediately follow Jesus, we need to turn our attention to present day and ask ourselves what does it take and what should we do to follow Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Following Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is different for many reasons for sure. First, it won't be as straightforward as a person coming up to us and saying follow me. So in some ways, that might have been the easiest way to know that you were following Jesus because you were with him visibly and were learning from him daily. But today we have to follow Jesus without the

physical or visual presence of him. I looked to a few passages in the bible which I felt could give us direction to find the path to follow Jesus and I wanted to share these with you.

The first is Matthew 16:24:<sup>24</sup> ***Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*** People who were executed at the cross in ancient times were people who rebelled against authority. So having to carry or take ones cross was to show that the person who rebelled against authority was so completely conquered that he had to carry the instrument that would kill him to the place of his death. We don't have crucifixions today, so if we think of taking up or carrying your cross today, it is to deny your ego and pride. To deny yourself is to give yourself over to Jesus, giving allegiance to him. This is about giving your whole self over to Jesus regardless of the cost of discipleship. Not just on Sunday but on every day of the week. You may say okay how do I give my whole self over to Jesus and deny my pride? When you start to put your relationship with Jesus and God at the center of your life you do this. When you understand the way that God wants us to live, and you actively work at loving our neighbor and having an attitude of servitude towards others, you do this.

The next passage is John 12:26:<sup>26</sup> ***If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him..*** Jesus spoke a lot about being a servant to others. He also spoke about the first being last and the last being first. When we think of servant we think of someone in a lower position. Someone who serves our needs and wants. And the word serve is what we should concentrate on. We don't have to think of being a servant as a lowly position, it is an esteemed position because Jesus modeled it for us through his life up until the time he gave his life for us on the cross. Jesus was

and is a king, but he lived his life from a servant perspective. He also demonstrated this servant heart after the last supper with his disciples when he washed each of their feet, an action that only servants did in that time. You can imagine the disciples shock when their leader, the person they know to be the Christ, was washing their feet. Peter is the only one recorded as saying no, you will never wash my feet. Of course Jesus told him he had to wash Peter's feet. Jesus was leaving the disciples one last example of the servant heart that he wanted them to have with each other and the world. Jesus used the word servant and to serve often enough to make it an esteemed word and action, and one that he wanted us to know was an important demeanor to take on.

The next passage is Matthew 6:33: <sup>33</sup> ***But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*** God's kingdom is where Jesus reigns and his authority is acknowledged and obeyed. To seek God's kingdom is to seek Jesus's rule in our own lives, in our circle of immediate influence, and as far outside that influence and around the world as we can reach. We are to see Jesus as a priority over the things of the world. Inherent in the kingdom of God is salvation, so we should seek that. Does that mean that we just throw away our bills and all the cares and worries of the world and neglect that? Of course not. Like I said last week, we do have to live in this world before we live in God's kingdom. But we should be making seeking salvation, living in obedience to God's word, and sharing the good news of the kingdom with others.

If you are wondering if you are seeking God's kingdom first, ask yourself where do I primarily spend my energies, where do I spend my time and money? Am I spending my time, money, and energy on things that will perish or in living in obedience to God. I heard this saying

last week and I am not sure if it was in Sunday school or somewhere else but someone said that you never see a hearse towing a U-Haul trailer. While there are beautiful things in this world that we may desire, we can't take any of it with us. It's important that we store up those treasures in heaven which is the place we want to spend eternity than to store them up on earth, where after you are gone they will be sold, traded, argued over, thrown away and eventually will perish, but they for sure will not be following after your hearse in a rented U-Haul trailer. Am I saying it's bad to have material positions or even material things that you find value in. No. I have a few pieces of artwork and antiques that I value. I also love angels and owls because to me they symbolize purity and wisdom, so I have several of these objects in my home. But I am making sure that my storehouse of treasures in heaven is gigantic compared to the small amount of items I may have here on earth. Do you look to God first for everything you need, including your purpose, daily provision, inspiration, family relationships, business plans, etc.? Do you understand your unique place in God's kingdom with the unique gifts and talents God has given you. Are you looking to the kingdom of God or the Kingdom of the world? I find that daily prayer helps me tremendously set my priorities and helps me to seek God's kingdom first.

And the final passage is John 8:31-32 <sup>31</sup> *So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, <sup>32</sup> and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* Do you abide by Jesus word? You may think, well I try, but I often fall short. Trying is half the battle. You may fall short sometimes, but you will succeed many times. And when you fall short, ask God to help you achieve. When I have had struggles with forgiving someone or loving someone I take that to God. I know that what I feel is impossible for me to do on my own is possible when I pray to God because nothing is impossible for God. What shall we be set free from if we know the truth? Jesus said in talking with the masses that

everyone who sins is a slave to sin so Jesus is offering us a spiritual freedom from the bondage of sin. And being free from the bondage of sin also sets us free from condemnation and free from a permanent death and eternity without God.

So what does it take to follow Jesus? A heart that truly wants to follow Jesus. A heart that is able to set aside one's own ego and pride and put Jesus as the authority in your life. A heart to serve others and embrace a spirit of servitude. A heart that seeks the kingdom of God first, and a heart that abides by the word of Jesus. If you are following Jesus you are no longer walking in darkness but are walking in the light as in John 8:12 <sup>12</sup> *Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*