

## Disciples Follow Jesus

Mark 1:14-20 says:

- 14. Now after John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God,**
- 15. and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent, and believe in the gospel.”**
- 16. And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishers.**
- 17. And Jesus said unto them, “Come follow Me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.”**
- 18. And straightway they left the nets, and followed Him.**
- 19. And going on a little further, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending the nets.**
- 20. And straightway He called them: and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after Him.**

Here from the *Gospel of Mark* we find the beginning of the ministry of Jesus with the calling of certain men to follow the Lord: Simon (Peter), Andrew, James, and John. All of these men soon became part of a select group of men we know as the Apostles, which means “one who is sent,” and three of these first four individuals became part of the inner circle, meaning they were Jesus’ closest friends who were privileged to witness Jesus’ transfiguration (Matthew 17); Jesus raising from the dead the daughter of the leader of the synagogue (Mark 5); and they were with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before He was crucified (Mark 14).

Some may wonder how it is that Peter and these other men were able to just drop everything at that moment to follow after this Man, Jesus. This is a reasonable question, and the Bible does, I believe, offer a reasonable explanation.

Andrew and John, as well as Philip, as we learned last week, were disciples of John the Baptizer before they were called by Jesus to follow Him. The mission of John, as we learned a few weeks ago, was to be the forerunner of the coming Messiah, to make ready the way of the Lord, and to make His paths straight, and to prepare the people for the imminent arrival of their King (Matthew 3:2-3). As disciples of John, these men would have been men of faith already, although it is also clear from their interactions with Jesus later on in the Gospels that their understanding of the Lord’s mission was clearly mistaken. As can be seen in the case of James and John and their mother, they fully expected Jesus to set up an earthly kingdom in which they desired places of honor (Mark 10:35; Matthew 20:21). The jealous reaction to this request by the other Apostles also shows their lack of understanding of the spiritual nature of the Lord’s Kingdom (Mark 10:41; Matthew 20:24). In spite of the human foibles, failings and shortcomings

of these men, however, they were men who were true seekers of God's will and truth in their lives.

Because of this noble characteristic they had about themselves, these disciples of John would have heard his message as it was being delivered in the wilderness. They would have witnessed as John the Baptizer pointed Jesus out to them and declared, ***"Behold, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world!"*** (John 1:29). As godly men who were followers of the that great Prophet of God, John the Baptizer, whom Jesus declared to be the greatest man born of women in Luke 7:28, they listened to John's command to follow Jesus when John said in John 1:36, ***"Behold, the Lamb of God!"*** Why did they follow Jesus? They followed Him instead of John because as John said about his and the Lord's ministry in John 3:30, ***"He must increase, but I must decrease."*** Therefore, these godly men were already familiar with this Man, Jesus, and they had talked to their family and friends about Him. Therefore, it is quite understandable, believable and reasonable that when this Man, Jesus, called these men to follow Him, they jumped at that opportunity.

Moving on, Matthew tells us in Matthew 16:24-28 that Jesus said the following to His disciples:

- 24. "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.***
- 25. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for My sake shall find it.***
- 26. For what shall a man be profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and forfeit his life? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his life?***
- 27. For the Son of man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and then shall He render unto every man according to His deeds.***
- 28. Truly I say unto you, there are some of them that stand here, who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in His Kingdom."***

In Matthew 16:24 Jesus said, ***"If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."*** These words applied to the disciples and to all who would come to a saving knowledge of Jesus through the teaching of His chosen Apostles. Jesus invites every person to follow, but from the words of Jesus it is paramount that those who desire to follow Him must have three distinctive characteristics or attitudes: a willingness to deny themselves, a willingness to take up his or her own cross, and a willingness to follow Jesus, wherever that will take them.

The first thing that we are supposed to learn when we become Christians is that we are now "owned" by Jesus Christ. We are not in charge of our lives any longer. "Self" is no longer at the helm; God is. ***16. Know you not, that to whom you present yourselves as servants unto obedience, his servants***

***you are whom you obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? 17. But thanks be to God, that, whereas you were servants of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching whereunto you were delivered; 18. and being made free from sin, you became servants of righteousness.*** (Romans 6:16-18)

We have been bought with a price. As the Apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, ***19. Or know you not that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit Which is in you, which you have from God? And you are not your own; 20. for you were bought with a price: glorify God therefore in your body.*** That price which paid for our salvation was a great one, indeed, for it cost Jesus His very own life-giving blood: ***“ . . . you were redeemed . . . with precious blood, as of a lamb without spot, even the blood of Christ”*** (1 Peter 1:18-19).

The Lord said in Matthew 16:26, ***“For what shall a man be profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and forfeit his life? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his life?”*** Jesus is telling us here, if we are but willing to listen, that there is nothing this world has to offer that is more important, or more precious, than our eternal life. He wants us to choose to follow Him rather than to lead a life controlled by selfish desires and carnal gratification that ultimately will lead to destruction. When we give up our desires, ambitions, possessions, calculation, and even our very life itself in service to Christ, we discover the true purpose of living. The Preacher summed it up thusly: ***“This is the end of the matter; all has been heard: fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man”*** (Ecclesiastes 12:13). To be willing to put personal desires and one's own entire being itself into God's hands means we understand that there is nothing that we can gain on our own in our lives in this world can compare to what we gain with Christ. So, we have to ask ourselves honestly, "Who is the boss in my life?" It is my prayer that you can answer honestly, "It is the Lord!"

**Following Jesus means to deny oneself.** To deny oneself means not only to surrender immediate material gratification, but also it is a willingness to let go of selfish desires and earthly security. This attitude turns self-centeredness to God-centeredness. Being "owned" by Jesus Christ is why we call Him Lord. Even though we easily call Him Lord, is He really and truly Lord of our entire lives? Look at this passage from the *Gospel of Matthew*:

***21. Another of the disciples said to Him, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” 22. And Jesus said to him, “Follow Me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.”*** (Matthew 8:21-22 ESV)

So what we see here is an example of a man who had jumped up and basically said, "Yeah, Jesus, I'll follow you. I've thought about it like You said, but I just need to take care of a few other things first."

Jesus did not cut this guy any slack, either. He said, **"Either follow Me, or go home. It is all or nothing with Me."**

After answering the man who wanted to go bury his father first, another man says to Him, **"I will follow You, Lord, but first let me go and say good-bye to my family"** (Luke 9:61 Simple English). Jesus said to this man, **"If anyone begins to plow a field, but then looks back, he is not qualified for the Kingdom of God"** (Luke 9:62 Simple English).

I imagine there were other similar responses as well. "Jesus, I'll follow You as soon as my job is more stable." "Yes, Jesus, I'll be right there as soon as I finish school. My education has to be a priority right now." "Jesus, you know that I want to follow You, but let me raised the kids first. You might lead me to places where I wouldn't want to take the kids."

There are so many responses to Jesus. How will Jesus ever determine who is sincere and who is not? How will we ever recognize the true disciples? He will recognize them as He always has: They will follow Him.

**"And when He got into the boat, His disciples followed Him."** (Matthew 8:23 ESV)

Does that not sound simple? Jesus issues a command, and those who are His disciples obey by following Him. The ones who speak up first are not necessarily His true disciples. The ones who delay and are admonished by Jesus are not necessarily disciples, nor are they necessarily **NOT** disciples.

Being a Christian means being a follower of Jesus Christ. Jesus became the owner of our lives when we became a Christian, so we are not in charge of our lives. "Self" is no longer in charge; God is.

It sounds simple and obvious, does it not? Disciples follow Jesus. Once again, notice this passage in Matthew's Gospel:

**"Now when Jesus saw a great crowd around Him, He gave orders to go over to the other side."** (Matthew 8:18 ESV)

That is a simple order, is it not? "Go to the other side of the sea." That has to be the most simple and direct command that Jesus gave. What was the response of the crowd?

**"And a scribe came up and said to Him, 'Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.'"** (Matthew 8:19-20 ESV)

One man jumped up right away and proclaimed, "Yes Sir, Jesus! I'll go wherever You want me to go!" Jesus warned this enthusiastic fellow to count the cost before agreeing to follow. Discipleship is not something to be taken lightly. Following Jesus is hard work. Jesus says, "Are you sure you are ready to give up everything? Enthusiasm does not count for much when the going gets tough."

Jesus wants us to choose to follow Him rather than to lead a life of controlled by selfish desires and self-satisfaction. He wants us to stop trying to control our own destiny and to let Him direct us instead. This makes good sense because, as the Creator, Christ knows better than we do what real life is about. However, sometimes we totally misunderstand and think that we are wiser, smarter, and more intelligent than God!

Much of our own lives is spent as the man in the following story. A man was walking along a narrow path, not paying much attention to where he was going. Suddenly he slipped over the edge of a cliff. As he fell, he grabbed a branch growing from the side of the cliff. Realizing that he could not hang on for long, he called out for help. The man said, "Is anybody up there?" A voice replied, "Yes, I am here!" "Who are you?" "The Lord." "Lord, help me!" "Do you trust Me?" "I trust You completely, Lord." "Good. Let go of the branch." "What?" "I said, let go of the branch!" After a long pause, the man asked, "Is there anybody else up there?"

When we give up our desires, ambitions, possessions, calculation, and even life itself in service to Christ, we discover the real purpose of living. To be willing to put personal desires and life itself into God's hands means to understand that nothing that we can gain on our own in our earthly lives can compare to what we gain with Christ. So, we have to ask ourselves honestly, "Who is the boss in my life?"

Secondly, Jesus said that following Him means to take up one's own cross. To take up the cross was a vivid illustration of the humility and submission that Jesus was asking of His followers. Soon after this, Jesus would take up His own cross. Jesus was predicting His own destiny here. When Jesus used this example of His followers taking up their crosses to follow Him, the disciples probably got the picture of Jesus on the cross. Jesus' words meant that His followers had to be prepared to obey God's command and to follow His will no matter what the personal consequences.

Sometimes taking up the cross might indeed mean death. The cross reminds us that it can be risky to follow Jesus. We are used to seeing the Jesus Who took up His cross for us, but we are not familiar or comfortable with a vision of ourselves taking up our own crosses. It is not easy to follow Jesus, but to take up one's cross and follow Jesus is even more difficult. Therefore, when we are taking up our own cross, we must count the cost and be prepared to pay it.

We read earlier from Matthew 16:25 Jesus saying, ***“For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for My sake shall find it.”*** In this verse Jesus introduced the concept that the Christian life is a paradox: To attempt to save your life means you only will lose it. A person who "saves" his or her life in order to satisfy carnal desires and goals apart from God ultimately "loses" his or her life. By contrast, those who willingly "lose" their lives for the sake of Christ and the Kingdom of God actually "save" their lives. To lose one's life for Christ refers to a person refusing to renounce Christ, even if the punishment were death. What a strange paradox this is and how hard it must have been for the disciples to understand its truth the first time they heard it. Find life by losing it? That hardly sounds logical on the surface, does it?

Jesus said that a world of pleasure centered on possessions, position, or power is ultimately worthless. Whatever a person has on Earth is only temporary; it cannot be exchanged for his or her soul. If you work hard at getting what you want, you might eventually have a "pleasurable" life, but in the end you will find it hollow and empty. No amount of money, power, or status can buy back a lost soul. The answer to the question, then, is that nothing is of enough value that it can be exchanged for one's soul.

How important would a lifetime of pleasure seem when compared to an eternity separated from God and all the blessings of life with Him? How foolish to seek worldly comfort and wealth and ignore the issue of our soul's eternal salvation. So, this morning, we have to ask ourselves, "How's my soul doing?"

This world says that life is good and we have a right to the pursuit of happiness. And most people engage in that pursuit by accumulating and acquiring all that this world can offer. However, in today's Scripture, Jesus proclaims a paradoxical truth. He proclaims: happiness, real happiness, lasting happiness is not found in selfishness, but in selflessness. The secular world tells us to get all we can. Jesus tells us to give all we can. This world teaches that to get life, you must grab it. Jesus tells us that to win, we must surrender. In a day of easy religion that promises to solve all our problems, Jesus speaks clearly to us: ***"If you are to follow Me, deny yourself and take up a cross."***

Jesus will come again. That is not my word but the promise of the Bible, and at that time He will be in His exalted state as King and Judge. Everyone's life will be reviewed and evaluated. While Jesus called His followers to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow, He also promised great reward to those who chose to follow Him. Their self-denial and discipleship would not be wasted. Christ's return will be an occasion of vindication and reward for the faithful: ***"He will repay everyone for what has been done"*** (Matthew 16:27).

Are you a disciple? Are you following Jesus? That is the simple test. Start with Jesus' most important commandments: Are you following Jesus by loving God and loving other people?