

GOD WITH US

Part 8: JESUS

Message 5 – Follow Me

Introduction

The word “disciple” is used 250 times in the New Testament as the description for all the followers of Jesus, not just the 12 “apostles.” In Luke 8:1-3 we find a list of female disciples of Jesus who were making important contributions to His work. In Luke 10 we see 70 disciples being sent out by Jesus. In Acts 1 there were 120 disciples gathered in an upper room waiting for the promise of the Spirit. To be Jesus’ *follower* was to be His *disciple*. At the same time, there was a small group of disciples that were called to follow Jesus in a special way, and to later provide leadership for the first Christians. These were the 12 “apostles” (messengers, or sent ones). In this study, we will focus primarily on the calling of a few of these 12 men, recognizing that what happened with them has relevance for us today as followers of Jesus.

The 1st Meeting: John 1:35-51

Some of the first disciples of Jesus were previously disciples of John the Baptist. John who pointed them to Jesus and encouraged them to become His disciples. They began to follow Jesus, and He in turned acknowledged them.

Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?” “Come,” he replied, “and you will see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon” (John 1:38-39).

“Four in the afternoon.” John knew the *exact hour* these men began following Jesus. It was a life-changing moment. One of the first to follow Jesus was Andrew. He went and told His brother Simon that he had found the Messiah. When Simon came to meet Jesus, he received a name-change on the spot.

Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter) (John 1:42).

Both names, “Cephas” and “Peter,” mean “rock.” It was clear right from the beginning that Peter would play an important role in the leadership of the early church. (Also see Matthew 16:16-19 where he is identified as a rock.)

As Jesus was preparing to depart for Galilee, he called Philip to be His follower. Philip, in turn, brought a friend to Jesus.

Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked. “Come and see,” said Philip (John 1:45-46).

Nazareth was not a respected town, probably because there was a Roman military garrison stationed there. Yet, Nathanael was willing to come and meet Jesus anyway. Note that Jesus returned Nathanael’s scorn for Nazareth with a compliment:

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel” (John 1:47-49).

Nathanael was quickly convinced. He made one of the first confessions that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

“Come and see” said Jesus. In these early scenes, brother brings brother to Jesus; friend brings friend to Jesus. That’s the way it is supposed to work. Bringing people to come and experience Jesus is a relational thing. Did you know that most people make their first visit to a church because of a personal invite from a friend? Who is there in your circle of relatives and friends that you are praying for, and inviting to come and learn about Jesus? Of course, it will be a journey of learning; but you can help someone take their first step. Who is in your top 3?

The 2nd Meeting: Matthew 4:18-22

After they had travelled north to Galilee, Jesus had a 2nd encounter with some of these same men. They were fishermen who worked on the Sea of Galilee. The fact that they had gone back to their fishing businesses indicates that they had not yet made the commitment to follow Jesus “full time.”

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him (Matt. 4:18-20).

This is the same pair of brothers that had met Jesus earlier. Now they were called to leave their occupations to follow Jesus on a fulltime basis. Two others left everything to follow Him:

“Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him” (Matt.4:21-22).

In that culture, to leave your father to handle the family business was a huge step of sacrifice and commitment. Based on the later actions of the mother of James and John, it may be that they had the support of their father and mother in their decision to follow Jesus (see Matt.20:20-22 on their mother’s support).

James and John not only had to part with their business; they had to part with their father as well. Yet, when Jesus calls most people to follow Him, He does not ask them to leave careers, homes, family and friends. Instead, He asks them to STAY in their locations and occupations and to be His disciples and witnesses in those spheres of life and influence. Look at the man who was cured of demons in Mark5:19. He wanted to leave everything and follow Jesus; but Jesus told him to go home and be a witness to his own people. Think about your own “pathway” that you walk every day. Can you ponder how that pathway might become your mission field? Who along that daily pathway can you show the love of Jesus to?

Two miracles that strengthened the disciples’ faith.

Even the men who became Jesus’ closest disciples (apostles) needed some convincing signs to believe in Jesus and follow Him fully. Two of those signs occurred early in Jesus’ public ministry.

- Water turned to wine: John 2:1-11

The first recorded miracle of Jesus was changing water to wine at a wedding in Galilee, just 3 days after He had returned north from

the baptism of John. A significant note occurs at the end of this miracle story, showing the impact on the disciples:

“What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which He revealed His glory; and His disciples believed in him” (John 2:11).

They had enough confidence in Jesus to follow Him to this point; but this miracle further assured them that He was Son of God and Messiah. It may have had a special impact on John the gospel writer, for he alone records it.

To “believe” is to “trust.” The more we spend time with someone, the deeper our trust in them grows. We see trust growing with these first disciples. The same is true for us today. The more time we spend getting to know Jesus (through His Word and through experience), the more our trust in Him will grow. How about you? Is your trust in Jesus growing over time as you walk with Him?

- The miraculous catch of fish: Luke 5:1-11

One miracle had a profound impact on Peter. They had been fishing all night but caught nothing. Jesus told them to put out into deep waters for a catch. They were a bit annoyed at His command. What could Jesus possibly know about fishing?! Then, after a massive catch of fish (proving Jesus’ command over the creation), they reacted with astonishment.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.” So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:8-11).

When we take steps to follow Jesus, He will show up in our lives in unexpected ways to confirm our decision to follow and to affirm His presence. What evidences have you seen that He is with you, caring for you and affirming your decision to follow Him? If you have not committed fully to following Jesus, are you willing to step out in faith believing that He will show up in unexpected ways?

The cost of discipleship: Luke 9:57-62

In Jesus’ day, there were some who would not follow Him because

other things were more important to them.

- A need for security.

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Lk. 9:57, 58).

Jesus looked into this person's heart and saw a high need for security. They needed answers to questions like: *Where will we stay? How will my needs be met? What will the future look like?* Jesus was not saying that this person's needs would *not* be met. He was saying that when we follow Him, we let *Him* dictate how life will play out. He will provide for us; but maybe not in the exact ways that we have in mind. We cannot demand comfort and/or security (as we define it) as a condition for commitment. Many times, following Jesus fully *will* involve sacrifice of some of the nicer things in life.

- A need to honor father first.

He said to another man, "Follow me." But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Lk. 9:59, 60).

Jesus wasn't prohibiting the man from going to his father's funeral. One of the Ten Commandments is: *"Honor your father and mother!"* This man had a deeper issue that could compromise his devotion to Jesus. Matthew Henry paraphrases this man's request: *"I have an aged father at home, who cannot live long, and will need me while he does live; let me go and attend on him until he is dead, and I have performed my last office of love to him, and then I will do anything."* Jesus was not telling this man to *neglect* his father (see 1 Timothy 5:8!). He was saying that in this man's case there were other family members (those who had no interest in following Jesus) who could care for their father for the duration of his life. This man needed to consider his priorities: Jesus *first* and father *second*, not the other way around.

- A need to stay near loved ones.

Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who

puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Lk.9:61,62).

Jesus is not against family ties; but this man had such a strong connection to home that he would always be “looking back” with a longing heart. This would compromise his ability to be focused on the mission with Jesus. A man can only plow a straight furrow if he fixes his eyes on a point at the end of the field and plows directly toward that point. If he’s always looking back, imagine what the field would look like?! Note the example of Elisha. When he was called to follow Elijah, he went home and had a ceremony to burn his plows and sacrifice his oxen! (1Kings 19:21)

There may be things in your life that are compromising or limiting your ability to follow Jesus wholeheartedly. Study these 3 stories and ask: What is keeping me from following Jesus fully? What conditions am I asking Jesus to meet? What do I have to sacrifice in order to fully surrender to Him?

A turning point in the call to follow: Matthew 16:13-28

The disciples were living and ministering with Jesus for 3 years. Near the end of this time, Jesus resolutely set His face toward Jerusalem to suffer and die on the cross. As He came to this turning point, the call for the disciples to follow took on new, more challenging implications. Jesus explained the difficult path ahead:

“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Matt.16:21).

Peter had just confessed Jesus as “*the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*” In turn, Jesus had honored him with words indicating that he would be a leader among leaders in the future of the church. But now, Peter felt that Jesus was being negative; that He was losing heart. So, his first major step as a ‘leader among leaders’ was one of his greatest blunders!

Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to You!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns” (Matt.16:22,23).

For even the most committed disciple, it is easy to replace God's agenda with our own. Peter meant well – he wanted Jesus to succeed. But he was out of touch with God's plan. He should have listened to Jesus instead of telling Jesus what to do! Henry Blackaby, in his excellent book "Experiencing God," says that it is never our job to create an agenda for God. Instead, our job is to find out where God is at work and to join Him there. This is the essence of "abiding" in Christ (John 15). We spend time with Him and stay connected to His heart and His will. How about you? Are you setting the agenda, or are you allowing God to set the agenda? Are you listening to hear Jesus' voice (His call, His directions, His plan), or are you doing most of the talking?

Jesus then explained to His disciples what it would cost them to follow Him fully.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in His Father's glory with His angels, and then He will reward each person according to what they have done" (Matt.16:24-27).

"Save your life ... lose it." "Lose your life ... save it." These defining words of Jesus inspired the young missionary & martyr Jim Elliott to pen profound words in his journal: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Elliott 'lost his life' (ambitions) in the service of Jesus as a missionary to Ecuador. Then, he 'lost his life' (literally) when he and 4 other men were killed while seeking to bring the message of Jesus' love to native Indians in Ecuador. How about you? Are you trying to "save your life?" If so, Jesus said you will lose it. Are you losing your life in Him and for Him? If so, He said you will find your truest life here on this earth . . . and your eternal reward will be great.

The final call to follow: John 21

After the unexpected and tumultuous events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus, the 11 disciples were not certain what they should do next. In His post-resurrection appearances, Jesus had promised that He would endow them with the power of the Spirit for further ministry; but the Spirit had not yet fallen on them

and the future was unclear. So . . . some of them went back to what they knew best – fishing on the Sea of Galilee.

In a scene reminiscent of Luke 5 (the miraculous catch of fish), they had fished through the night and caught nothing. Then, a man shouted out from the shore that they should cast their nets on the other side of the boat. They did so and their nets were filled to overflowing with fish. Peter immediately recognized it was Jesus on the shore so he jumped in the water and swam in. The others hauled in the fish and then joined Jesus and Peter on the shore.

Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples ventured to question Him, “Who are You?” knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise. This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead (John 21:12-14).

Jesus interacted with Peter in a special way, allowing Him to confess his love for Jesus three times (perhaps to counter his three denials of Jesus earlier). Jesus then got up and prepared to walk down the beach. He gave Peter words about his future that made it clear he would suffer martyrdom for his commitment to Jesus:

“Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!” (John 21:18-19)

The gospel of John began with Jesus saying, “Follow Me!” It ends with the same charge. (Compare 1:43 with 21:19.) Peter heard and understood the words that Jesus spoke concerning his future (suffering and death). But he wanted to know what would be the outcome for the others, particularly John who was walking right behind him.

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?”) When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me” (Jn. 21:20-22).

John 21:22 gives us the “WITTY” principle (What Is That To You). No two stories of following Jesus will be the same. But sometimes we want assurances. “If I’m going to suffer, will he suffer? If she’s going to have it easy, will I have it easy?” When we commit our lives to following Jesus, we are saying to Him: YOU write the script for my life as your disciple. I won’t worry about what you have in mind for everyone else. Do you ever look around and find yourself comparing your journey with Jesus to what other people are experiencing? What an interesting visual lesson John leaves us with at the end of the gospel. Peter needed to keep his eyes on Jesus, Who was leading the way down the beach, not on other followers who were behind them.

Discussion Questions

1. “Following Jesus” happens in stages. The first step is to “believe” in Him (become a child of God). The final step is to “see Him face to face” (go to be with God). How would you describe the stage of following Jesus that you are in right now?
2. Clearly there were sacrifices that had to be made to follow Jesus, and many people found it difficult to make those sacrifices. What sacrifices do you think that Jesus is calling you to make, and what difficulties are you experiencing in making those sacrifices?
3. Reflect on Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:24-27. Recall the words written by the missionary/martyr Jim Elliott: *He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.* How does an eternal perspective change the way you live your earthly life as a follower of Jesus?
4. Why do you think we are prone to comparing our spiritual journey with that of others? What is the danger in this?