

## “Follow Me”

Mark 1:14-20

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“Follow me,” said Jesus to Peter and his brother Andrew, along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. “Follow me,” said Jesus to James and John, as they mend their nets in their fishing boat. “Follow me,” said Jesus to Matthew, sitting at his tax collector’s booth. They all got up and followed. Peter and Andrew left their nets behind, and followed Jesus. James and John left their father and the hired men behind, and followed Jesus. Matthew left the tax collection booth behind, and followed Jesus.

“Follow me.” Two short, simple words. Easy to say. Not so easy to do.

The first word, “follow,” is a command. It’s not an invitation; it’s not a request. Grammatically, it’s called an *imperative*. It’s like a command you would give to your dog. “Come.” “Sit.” “Heel.” “Stay.” It implies a clear hierarchical relationship. This is not a friend talking to a friend. This is a *master* talking to a *servant*. One of them ranks higher than the other one. The proper response is “Yes, sir.”

It also implies *movement*. Get up. Stop what you’re doing. Leave behind whatever you were working on. Leave behind even the *people* that you were with. Stand up, come, and follow. I am going *this way*, and I want *you* to come *this way* too. And you don’t have a choice in the matter!

It’s a strong command. The master isn’t just expressing a *wish*. He *expects* faithful *obedience*.

If you’re reading along in Mark’s gospel, this is only the *second thing* that Jesus says. The first words out of his mouth are spoken broadly, to anyone and everyone who will listen: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Then, just two verses later, Jesus addresses two specific people: “Follow me.” It’s the third command to come out of his mouth. “Repent” – that was for *everybody*. “Believe in the good news” – that was for *everybody*. “Follow me” – that one is addressed to *very specific people*: the ones whom Jesus chooses to call.

When Jesus comes to the boat where James and John and their father Zebedee and some other men are working on their nets, Jesus doesn’t tell *all* of them to follow him. He singles out James and John. “Follow me,” he says to them. They get up and go. Zebedee and the hired men are left to wonder what just happened. As we read through the four gospels, we *never* see those guys again.

So Jesus gathers a variety of followers. People who have responded to his command, “Follow me.” These are like concentric circles, rings surrounding a single point. The first group, closest to Jesus, is comprised of just three men, Peter and James and John. These three are the only ones Jesus invited up the mountain to witness Jesus transfigured. These three are the only ones Jesus allowed to watch when he raised the daughter of a synagogue leader from the dead. These are the only ones he took when he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. This was his inner circle; perhaps, his closest friends.

The next circle includes those three, plus nine others: the twelve disciples, or, more accurately, the twelve *apostles*, the twelve men to whom Jesus revealed the meaning of his parables, the twelve men whom Jesus sent out in pairs to heal the sick and cast out demons, the twelve men with whom Jesus shared the Passover meal on his last night on earth in human flesh, the twelve men whom Jesus commissioned to proclaim the gospel to all the nations. Except, of course, by the end of the gospels, there are only *eleven* of them. One of them decided to stop following Jesus, betraying him to his enemies. Now I know that some of you might wish that Jesus had chosen some women to be in this group; I would urge you to bear in mind two things. First, in that social context, women would not have had the ability to proclaim the gospel message to nearly the same extent. Second, remember that these twelve men *really* mess some things up. They frequently misunderstand what Jesus is up to; at times, they try to stop him from doing what he wants or needs to do; they get into disputes and arguments amongst themselves; some of them jockey for position at Jesus' side; they fall asleep at precisely the wrong time; when Jesus is arrested, one of them lies about knowing Jesus not just once, not just twice, but *three times*; and the other ten all run away and hide. These men do not exactly come out looking like star pupils. Only after they receive the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost do they really start acting with the kind of maturity and responsibility one would expect from Jesus's hand-picked group of twelve. The women who follow Jesus frankly come out looking a whole lot better than these select twelve do.

The third group is a large group of 70 individuals whom Jesus appoints in the tenth chapter of Luke. He sends these seventy on a particular mission, distributing them in pairs to bring the Kingdom of God to every town and place that Jesus wanted to go. He sends them out to share the peace of God and to cure the sick, and these seventy followers are surprised to discover that they even have the power to cast out demons. Luke does not give us the names of these seventy individuals, but later Christians did try to identify who they were. There are several different lists that have come down to us from later times, containing names of various people who are mentioned in other parts of the New Testament, or who later became early leaders of the church in various cities and towns. It is fun to look at those lists, and consider the possibilities of what might have been, but the truth of the matter is that we will never know for certain which specific seventy of his many followers Jesus appointed for that special mission.

The fourth group includes all the other many individuals who follow Jesus around through his earthly ministry, like the crowds that follow him from place to place. This large group contains some very specific women, whose names we know: Mary, called Magdalene, probably because she was from the village of Magdala; Luke tells us Jesus had cured her of seven demons. A woman named Joanna, whose husband managed the household of the governor of Galilee. These three, and others, provided financial resources for Jesus and his disciples; they were important benefactors, who kept his ministry going. Some of the women who followed Jesus stood nearby as Jesus was crucified; some of them came to the tomb after he was buried; a woman named Salome was among those, along with several women named Mary, including, of course, Jesus' own mother. There were some whole family groups that followed Jesus, like the siblings Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Some notable men were also among this large group of followers, like the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea, and a variety of men and women whom Jesus helped or healed along the way, like blind Bartimaeus. In all, hundreds and hundreds of followers.

Jesus' arrest and execution took many of these followers by surprise, despite the fact that Jesus had been predicting his death for some time. Many of those followers scattered to the winds. But the book of Acts tells us that after Jesus was raised from the dead, and before the day of Pentecost, there were some 120 men and women who were "constantly devoting themselves to prayer." (Acts 1:14)

Then comes the day of Pentecost, and the explosive growth of the church that began that day through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which creates a *fifth* group of followers of Jesus – all those people who have come to believe in Jesus and the gospel message about him, yet never knew him in the flesh.

It is that fifth group that all of us are in. It is that fifth group that every generation of Christians has been in, over the course of the last twenty centuries, spanning the globe, of every race and color and language. According to the Wycliffe Bible Translators, the complete Bible has been translated into 704 different languages, the entire New Testament into another 1,551 languages, and portions of the Bible into an additional 1,160 languages, thus making the gospel available to people in nearly 3,500 different languages. And – according to their calculations – there still remain 167 million people in our world today who do *not* have access to the Bible in their native language. There is still much work to do!

So, all told, *billions upon billions* of people fall into this fifth group of followers of Jesus Christ.

But what does it really mean, for us today, to *follow* Jesus? We can't just get up and go with him wherever he goes, as those first disciples in Galilee did. We can't just sit around and listen to him while he talks, the way those crowds did long ago. He's not here, *in the flesh*, the way he was then. That means it requires a little more *active effort* on our part. We do have many of his words. Many Bibles even print those words in red for you, so they stand out. Some of what he says is hard to understand. Some passages require a fair amount of explanation and commentary. That's what people like me are for. But please understand, *your job is not to follow me*. I don't have it all figured out yet. Beware of any so-called Bible "expert" who claims that they do! Every week I learn some new things.

Some of Jesus' words also require *thoughtful discussion* with other people who are also trying to follow Jesus. Listening to a speech is *one* form of learning. *Talking* about scripture, *discussing* it, *sharing your perspectives with others, and hearing their perspectives*, that's *another* form of learning. Sometimes, another member of a group will have an insight that might never have come to you – or me.

*Prayer* is essential. Not just taking our laundry lists of wishes to God, but *listening for God to speak to us*. For *God does still speak*. The thing is, we can only hear him if we're willing to listen.

These are not all substitutes for one another; the well-rounded Christian follows Jesus by listening to him through a *variety* of different means and experiences. There is always more to learn. The library at Princeton Seminary, where I went to school, has *1.3 million books*. I've read many books over the years, but only read a tiny fraction of *that* vast corpus. There is still so much that I don't know!

Please make sure you're following *Jesus*. Your job is not to follow me, or any evangelist you might find on TV. Your job is not to follow the whims of any charismatic leader, any political figure, any personality in the sports or music industries, but to follow *Jesus*. Your allegiance is not to any group, any organization, any political party, any ideology, or the latest conspiracy theory. Your primary allegiance is to *Jesus*. Priests and pastors and other Christian leaders can be helpful, *but they are not a substitute for Jesus*. You need to understand that we are *all* fallible, and none of us gets it right 100% of the time.

*There is only one Master whom we are to follow*. There is only one Master who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. That Master is *Jesus*. Do not settle for any substitutes. There is no one else worth following with your whole heart. Get up, leave behind all the things that distract you, give no heed to the voices that speak contrary to his values. For it is *in Jesus* that you will find rest for your soul.

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