

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 21 September 2008

No. T0540

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Various Topics: Jesus said, "Follow Me..."

This morning we are going to look at the situations in which the Lord Jesus uses the well known expression "Follow Me". When we think of following Jesus we automatically think of discipleship and what it means for the Christian to follow Christ. But Christian discipleship begins with salvation.

In Matthew 9 we read about the salvation of Matthew. "As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him," (verses 9-13 see also Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:27).

Matthew was the writer of the Gospel of Matthew which describes Jesus as the Messiah. When Jesus met Matthew he was a tax collector. As such, Matthew was collaborating with the occupying Roman forces and, as a result, making a good living. In essence he was profiting from the distress of his fellow countrymen. Jesus found Matthew just like He found another tax collector, Zacchaeus in Luke 19. We learn in Luke 15 that Jesus had a remarkable ability to draw to Himself those whose lives seemed at such a distance from God. "Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, 'This Man receives sinners and eats with them.' So He spoke this parable to them, saying: 'What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.'" (Luke 15:1-7)

These scriptures were fulfilled in Matthew's experience. Like the shepherd found the lost sheep, Jesus finds Matthew and simply says, "Follow me." Without hesitation Matthew responds. The parallel with Zacchaeus is interesting as we next see Jesus in Matthew's home eating with other tax collectors and people described as sinners. The Pharisees show their surprise that Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners and Lord Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." He then explains that He had come to call sinners to repentance. The fact that Matthew becomes one of the twelve apostles demonstrates that he was a recipient of the Lord's mercy and had repented of his sin. Remarkably it is Matthew who is chosen to write the Gospel which describes Jesus as the Messiah. A man who had initially turned his back on the plight of his people for profit becomes the one who presents Jesus to them as the true Messiah. What a transformation! And it was brought about by the simple words, "Follow Me." Never let us underestimate the power of Christ to enable those who seem so far from God to come by simple faith to know and follow the Saviour!

Andrew and his brother Peter had similar experiences in John 1. In this chapter John the Baptist describes Jesus in verse 29 as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Then in verse 36 John the Baptist simply describes Him as "the Lamb of God." Two of John's disciples were with John when he described Jesus in this way. As a result, they followed Jesus and spent the day with Him. One of the two disciples was Andrew, Peter's brother. Afterwards Andrew finds Peter and tells him, "We have found the Messiah" and then takes Peter to Jesus. That day these two brothers came to know Christ.

Such stories demonstrate what it means to come to know Jesus as our Saviour. But having believed in Christ we need to follow Him day by day. Jesus also uses the expression "Follow Me" to call His disciples to serve Him. This was exactly what happened to Peter and Andrew. Following their first meeting with Jesus we are told in Matthew 4:19, Jesus meets the two brothers again and says to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." They immediately left their nets and followed Him. Andrew and Peter were called to become "fishers of men". By occupation they were fishermen, they brought fish to land. Their new service was evangelism. They would bring people to the Saviour. It is interesting that they did this in two distinct ways. I live close to the sea and we often take visitors to a Fishing Heritage Centre. Part of this experience involves going onto a fishing trawler. On the boat the guide explains how the enormous dragnets used by the fishermen catch thousands of fish. It always reminds me of how Peter evangelised. He preached publicly on a large scale bringing thousands to Christ through his powerful preaching.

On the other hand, my brother-in-law is an angler. He catches fish one by one. It takes a long time and great patience. This is how Andrew evangelised starting with his own brother. It was Andrew who brought the young boy who had five loaves and two fishes to Jesus. It was Andrew who with Philip brought the Greeks to Jesus in John 12.

In Acts 8 we see Philip the Evangelist operating as a "trawler man" and an "angler". Early in the chapter he leads the city of Samaria to Christ and at the end of the chapter he leads one man, the Ethiopian eunuch, to Jesus. Following Jesus enables us to bring others to Christ. Sharing our faith in Christ is an important part of following Jesus.

Jesus explains later in John 12:26 "If any man serve Me, let him follow Me." To be able to serve the Lord Jesus we have to be His disciples. Before we can be the disciples of Jesus, He has to be our Saviour. We cannot convey the love of God to others until we first know it for ourselves. This was the experience of Matthew, Andrew, Peter and Philip. Is it ours?

Of course there are obstacles to following the Lord. These come in different forms. In Luke 9 some of these difficulties are outlined. First of all, someone comes to Jesus and says, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go" (verse 57). Jesus challenges this potential disciple by explaining, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (verse 58). The Lord Jesus teaches us that following Him has its costs and that true disciples need to be dependent rather than self confident.

In verse 59 Jesus says to someone else, "Follow Me." But the person He calls says, "Lord... let me first go and bury my father." The Lord's answer seems a harsh one, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." I don't think the Lord is telling us not to attend to normal family responsibilities but highlighting in the person whom He was calling a specific issue – family ties – which were being used as an excuse not to follow Jesus. We can be very clever at introducing what appear legitimate reasons for delaying actions as a means of avoiding the path of discipleship.

In verses 61 and 62 another person wants to follow the Lord. "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.' But Jesus said to him, 'No one, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.'" Here again the issue is that of priority. The Lord presents discipleship as a serious occupation which takes priority over all other demands. This kind of commitment was demonstrated in the twelve disciples who had left everything to follow Jesus. The same faith has been seen in the people of God down through the centuries.

In Mark 10:21 we have a remarkable incident. A rich young ruler comes to Jesus wanting to know how to inherit eternal life. He was asking a genuine question and he had tried to live a holy life. It says Jesus loved him. There are very few occasions in the Gospels where such an expression is used. It demonstrates the love that Christ has for each of us and His desire to make us His disciples. But Jesus still addresses the issue which was holding the young man back. "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.' But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."

Materialism is still a great obstacle to true discipleship and hinders even the most sincere people from following the Lord. It can also weaken the ability of true Christians to follow the Lord as they should. The simple command to "Follow Me" carries great challenges. These challenges continue to test us throughout our lives. This is because following Christ is a matter of faith.

In 1 Peter 1:6-8 the apostle describes how God wants to demonstrate the genuineness of our faith by testing it. As a cricket fan I enjoy watching cricket test matches. It is called a "test match" because the skills of two teams are put to the test. God also puts His people's faith to the test. God's object is not to undermine our faith but to demonstrate its reality. "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory."

The cost of following Jesus is something the Lord addresses in Luke 9:23, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." The Lord Jesus never hid the cost of discipleship from His disciples. He never pretended following Him would be an easy pathway. In this verse He presents discipleship as a daily challenge. I find it very helpful to face life in terms of daily challenges. How often do we hear people who are going through difficulties saying, "I just take it a day at a time." This is a good way to think of discipleship. We make many choices every day of our lives and often we take them by focusing on what seems best for us. The Lord introduces the difficult subject of denying ourselves. Some might ask "What are the benefits of self denial?" Well, if we deny ourselves cigarettes or the wrong kinds of food the likelihood is that our health will improve. Equally, in a spiritual sense denying ourselves produces in us the character of Christ. It was the pathway the Lord Jesus took and

we are encouraged to follow in His steps. "But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:5-8).

In Galatians 5 we read, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (verses 22-25). One of the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. We don't hear a lot of teaching on this subject but in a world where excess is often in evidence, self control is an important part of following Christ. Denying ourselves is part of self control and the fruit of the Spirit.

The matter of taking up the cross is an interesting one. In the days when Jesus lived, anyone carrying a cross was carrying a death sentence. Jesus carried His own cross, "Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. Then they took Jesus and led Him away. And He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha." (John 19:16-17). But in Mark 15:21 we are told, "Then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross." Here we see that at some stage Simon carried the cross of Jesus.

This helps illustrate what Paul teaches in Romans 6, "Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (verse 3-4).

He goes on in verse 11, "Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God" (verses 11-13).

The carrying of the cross is about judging our old nature which would give way to sin and its consequences. At the cross, our old nature was judged in Christ. Christ's resurrection is about newness of life. Following Jesus emphasises putting to death our old life and walking in newness of life - living our lives as Christ lived His. In the words of Romans 12, presenting ourselves "a living sacrifice."

But following the Lord is not all about sacrifice; it is also about assurance. In John 10:27 Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me." We have a living relationship with Christ. He communicates with us through His word and gives direction to our lives. The idea of the shepherd conveys these aspects. The sheep belong to the shepherd. He communicates with them, he knows, and he leads them. This is beautifully described by David in Psalm 23.

- In verse 1, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." We have a special relationship with the Shepherd.
- In verse 2, "He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters." The shepherd provides for us.
- In verse 3, "He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." We are empowered to follow the Shepherd in righteousness and witness to Him in today's world.
- In verse 4, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." We have the presence of the Shepherd throughout our discipleship.
- In verse 5, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over." We have the fellowship of the Shepherd in a world which is often hostile to our faith in Christ.
- Finally in verse 6, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

We find that by following the Shepherd we experience His goodness and mercy today and we are assured of an eternal home in the future.

The command to "Follow Me" is about following a person - the Lord Jesus Christ. At the end of John's Gospel, Jesus foretells Peter that he would be martyred as an old man, "'Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.'" This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God" (John 21:18-19).

It then goes on, "And when He had spoken this, He said to him, 'Follow Me.'" (end of verse 19). The words Jesus had spoken to Peter at the beginning of his discipleship are the words Jesus speaks to him just before Jesus returns to heaven. This demonstrates that following Jesus is a lifelong process.

It is also interesting to know that, before the Lord was about to go to the cross, Peter thought himself capable of following Jesus into death. "Simon Peter said to Him, 'Lord, where are You going?' Jesus answered him, 'Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward.' Peter said to Him, 'Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake.' Jesus answered him, 'Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times'" John 13:36-38.

Peter had to discover, as we all do, that the secret of true discipleship is not having confidence in our own strength and abilities but learning to completely trust the Saviour we are following. Peter learned this vital lesson and was transformed from the disciple who denied his Lord into the one who served Him so well and ultimately glorified Him in martyrdom.

As Peter walked with Jesus, he noticed John following at a distance and asks, "Lord, and what shall this man do?" Jesus replies, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me."

Our natural curiosity can divert us from what our priority should be. It is good to have an interest in the lives of other Christians and their service for the Lord. But we need to be aware of two things.

First, our interest should never deteriorate into prying into other people's business. Paul addresses this issue in his two letters to the Thessalonians because interfering in the business of others was a problem for that church. "But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you" 1 Thessalonians 4:10-11. "For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread" (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).

Secondly, the final words of Jesus to Peter, "You follow Me", emphasise to us that we need to remember the personal responsibility we have to follow Jesus. The behaviour of others should never divert us from this fundamental aspect of our Christian lives.

Towards the end of Peter's life, he writes in 1 Peter 2:21-22 about following the Lord Jesus, "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 'Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth.'"

The apostle reminds us of something he had done so well - our calling to follow in the steps of Jesus Christ. Are we responding day by day to that calling?

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