

What does it mean to follow Jesus?

Matthew 4:12-25

Mark Vroegop

12 Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. 13 And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

15 "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—16 the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned."

17 From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

18 While walking 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 fishermen. 19 And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

23 And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. 24 So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. 25 And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan (Matt 4:12-25)

Last week I intentionally left you hanging as to the fifth and final point regarding the temptation of Jesus. I did this because I saw a connection between the final reason for Christ's temptation and the subsequent verses in Matthew 4. In other words, there seems to me to be a flow of thought with the Baptism of Jesus (Mt 3:13-17), the Temptation of Jesus (Mt 4:1-11), and our text this morning about the beginning of Jesus' public ministry (Mt 4:12-28). It flows like this:

- The Baptism of Jesus shows us the inauguration of Jesus' ministry and his identification with human beings.
- The Temptation of Jesus validates the identification of Jesus by showing us his complete obedience to the Father

- All of this leads to the launching of Jesus' ministry as he calls the disciples to follow him

Inauguration and identification through baptism, validation through testing, leading to the call to follow him. And this flow will conclude our first series in Matthew, and it sets up the next series on the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' longest recorded sermon.

What was the fifth point?

I gave you four reasons last week that Jesus was tempted:

1. To show us divinely designed testing
2. To uncover the schemes of the devil
3. To highlight the enormous value of the Word
4. To demonstrate Jesus' sympathy

The fifth reason that he was tempted was **to provide an example to follow.**

Central to the reason why Jesus became a human and why he was tempted was to show us how to live. He lives a perfectly obedient life, including perfect resistance to the temptations of the Devil. So at one level, the temptation of Jesus is given to us so that we can see how we should fight the enemy. We see his resistance through the Word, and his refusal to embrace the short-cuts offered by the enemy. Jesus shows us how to battle temptation. But there is another level here.

The temptation of Jesus is part of a much bigger plan implicit in the incarnation of Jesus: he became human so that we could follow him. In other words, the inauguration, identification, and validation all lead to a call to follow him.

Jesus become a man and as a part of his humanity he experienced temptation so that we could know him, love him, and be like him. The reason why Matthew positions the narratives like he does is so that we can understand some important things about Jesus which leads to a love for Jesus, which leads to life committed to being like Jesus. This is how I see the incarnation of Jesus (including his baptism and his temptation) fitting into the call to follow him.

The call to follow Jesus is an invitation to know him, love him, and be like him.

We've seen him in baptism. We've seen him in temptation. We loved how he identified with us and how he sympathizes with us. And before we hear what he is going to say in the Sermon on the Mount, we need to watch him so that we can be like him. We need to hear his discipleship call. It isn't join this movement, agree to this document, or take this class; it is **follow me!** Be like me. Know me, love me, and be like me. So how does Matthew show us this?

Following Jesus Means...

Matthew shows us what Jesus is like and what it means to follow him. We learn how Jesus conducts his ministry, and we learn what happens when he invites the disciples to join him.

1. Being light in darkness (v 12-17)

The first thing that we observe in this text is the way in which Jesus' public ministry began, and what it means. Jesus launched his ministry in a rather unusual way and Matthew presents this with a "light in darkness" tone. There are many interesting things to observe here:

- Jesus' ministry began after the arrest of John the Baptist. Herod Antipas (Herod the Great's son) had an illicit relationship with Herodias, the wife of his half-brother. Herod Antipas and Herodias divorced their spouses and married. John publicly condemned this act, and it resulted in his imprisonment.
- Jesus likely feared a broader crack-down, and he fled to the city of Capernaum which was on the Sea of Galilee in northern Galilee.
- Capernaum is significant, according to Matthew, because it is in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, and it is linked to a prophecy in Isaiah 9. The Galilean region of Zebulun and Naphtali were fertile regions and fairly populated. Galilee was a crossroads for Phoenicia, Syria, and Samaria, and it had seen a fair amount of foreign occupation. Therefore, it was an area of Israel that was diverse ethnically and spiritually. Races and religions abounded, and the result was that southern Israel viewed the region of Galilee with contempt. The Jewish establishment viewed it as a "dark region." And their assessment would not have been inaccurate.
- The quotation from Isaiah 9 makes Matthew's point very clear: he views Jesus' ministry launch in this region as no less than light coming into the darkness. Even though Jesus does not focus on the Gentiles in the early part of his ministry (see 10:5-6, 15:24), Matthew apparently wants us to see that Jesus has come to be a light in the midst of darkness, and specifically a light to the Gentiles. Now we will see the full fruit of this at the end of Matthew in the Great Commission. But here is interesting to note how Jesus' ministry began.
"...the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and those dwelling in the region and shadow of death on them a light has dawned" (v 16).
- Finally, note that Jesus' message in that dark region was identical to John. Jesus is calling for the people to change their mind about themselves and God (to repent) because the kingdom of heaven (the already and not yet of God's reign) is close at hand. It is remarkable that Jesus' message is a word-for-word copy of John's.

Jesus has appropriately taken the spotlight of the kingdom message, and he is proclaiming it to a rejected, despised, written-off region of the Jewish world. And isn't that just like Jesus? He is light in the midst of darkness. Jesus doesn't fit the expectations of the religious people of his

day. He does his work among the lowly and the despised people of his day.¹ Jesus developed throughout his ministry a reputation for caring for people in darkness.

10 And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. 11 And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12 But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt 9:10-13).

Jesus was light in the midst of darkness. He loved the needy, the outcast, and the written-off. He ministered to sinful people. The kind of sinful people that most people felt were beyond hope. Jesus was light to everyone but especially to the deepest and darkest regions of society.

Therefore, following him means that we need to be light in the darkness. So do you have any "shocking" friends? Do you avoid people or situations that are uncomfortable? Do you love the unlovely, care for the neglected, and encourage the hopeless?

Imagine a physician whose practice is failing, and when you inquire as to what is going on he says, "I just don't like sick people!" You would tell him that sick people are your business. When it comes to the church, the gospel, and Jesus, sinful people – really, really sinful people – is what we all are and what we are all about!

Following Jesus means that our destiny is secure (see Romans 8:28-30), but that security was meant to free us to love radically, speak boldly, and invest deeply. An old hymn by Frances Crosby came to my mind as I prepared this sermon:

*Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,
Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave;
Weep o'er the erring one, lift up the fallen,
Tell them of Jesus, the mighty to save.*

*Refrain:
Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,
Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.*

Following Jesus means being light in the darkness – to know him, to love him, to be like him.

2. Deciding to make a radical change (vv 18-22)

¹ Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew – Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 82.

The second observation about following Jesus comes from Jesus' recruitment of his first disciples – Peter, Andrew, James, and John. And from verses 18-21 we see that becoming a follower of Jesus means a radical change.

It is important to note here that it is Jesus who does the recruiting. He finds them and asks them to follow him. This is not the usual way that a Jewish rabbi would work. Typically it was the students who found their teacher, asking if they could live and study with the teacher. Jesus is intentionally calling these men to be his disciples. It is Jesus who invades their normal existence.

Peter, Andrew, James and John are all fishermen. It is telling that Jesus begins his recruitment of his disciples with unsophisticated and socially unimpressive men. Acts 4:13 tells us that after the resurrection of Jesus, Peter and John were brought before the rulers, elders, and scribes, and that they marveled these uncommon and uneducated men had such boldness. I love their conclusion: "they recognized that they had been with Jesus."

Jesus' call to follow him is decisive and unequivocal. "He is not inviting them to a pleasant stroll along the seashore but inviting them to discipleship."² The word "follow" means "come here, after me." It is a present imperative which means that this is a command to be continually obeyed. Jesus is calling them to a radical change.

The calling is described by Jesus as being a "fisher of men." Jesus identified with what they were doing but laid before them a more compelling mission. He is calling them to be part of the heralding of the kingdom message and the coming judgment of God (see Matt 13:47-50). "It is not longer a question of taking fish from the lake, but of drawing men up out of the abyss of sin and death, catching them in the great net of God."³ He was calling them to leave their present life and purpose in order to be a part of his kingdom mission.

Notice their response. Regarding Peter and Andrew the text says "immediately they left their nets and followed him" (v 21). Regarding James and John the text says "immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him" (v 22). The decisive nature of the decision is mentioned twice, and it is not an accident. There is something important here about following Jesus. Let me share two things with you:

First, I want you to understand that to be a Christian is to be a follower of Jesus or to be his disciple. The Great Commission after all is not to go and make believers; it is to go and make disciples. Belief is certainly part of that but there is more. To be a disciple means that you want to be like someone else. It implies obedience, action, and allegiance. To say that you believe in Jesus but are not a follower of him is an oxymoron. People who know Jesus, love Jesus, want to be like Jesus; they follow him.

² Morris, 85.

³ Morris quoting Dietrich

Secondly, I want you to see that being a follower of Jesus means that you've left other things behind. Jesus' call to be his disciple is an authoritative call. His call is immediate, unquestioning, and sacrificial.⁴ The word "left" means to abandon, and that is what is required of the disciples of Jesus.

Belief without abandonment from all others for Christ is not true belief. Knowing about Jesus is not enough. Jesus bids people to follow him. To know him, to love him, and to be like him.

3. Living the Gospel in words and deeds (vv 23-25)

The final element from our text comes from the way in which Jesus conducted his ministry. We've already seen how he is a light in the darkness and that he demands a radical change. Verses 22-25 tell us about kind of ministry that Jesus did. And if you were to fast forward the New Testament into the book of Acts, you will find that this is the same ministry that the apostles embraced – namely living out the gospel in words and deeds.

According to verse 22, Jesus' ministry involved three things:

- Teaching in the synagogues (centers of Jewish instruction)
- Proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom
- Healing illness

The synagogue was the center of Jewish life for people who were not residents of Jerusalem. They developed after the exile to Babylon. They were primarily focused on prayer and study, but they also served as community courts.⁵ It makes sense that Jesus would go to the place where spiritual matters were discussed. He went to the people and taught them.

But there was another dimension of his ministry – proclamation. The Greek word here means to preach, to herald, to be a public crier of important news. This was not the systematic teaching that Jesus did in the synagogue; it was an urgent appeal and a forthright proclamation. And Jesus went about proclaim to them the gospel (the Good News) of the kingdom. So the call to "repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" – God was drawing near – was not bad news; it was good news. However, it wasn't good news if you didn't want him to draw near or if you weren't ready to meet Him.

Again that is why following Jesus flows from knowing him and loving him.

Notice finally here that Jesus' ministry is holistic. He is not just concerned with content and message; Jesus aims to help and to heal. "The first act of the Messiah is not the imposition of

⁴ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Publishing, 2008), 137.

⁵ Turner, 139.

his commandments but the giving of himself.”⁶ Matthew shows us that Jesus not only declares the message of the kingdom, he demonstrates his message through compassion.

No doubt Matthew wanted to show us the power of Jesus through these miracles, but there is also a sense of the model of Jesus’ ministry. Verses 23-24 indicate that Jesus was healing all kinds of diseases that were oppressing people, including demon oppression. Jesus was a liberator in the fullest sense of the word. His message and his ministry set people free.

We sometimes take this for granted with Jesus’ ministry, but consider with me why he chose this kind of ministry model. He could have just been concerned about their belief in him. Yet he chose to bring about relief as well. Why? Because the Good News attacks the problem of sin at every level.

- It brings forgiveness to depraved human beings so that they can be right with God.
- It changes the hearts of people so that they see every evil, every ailment, every disease, every oppression through a gospel lens. They are grieved over a sin-cursed world, and they work to see it reversed.
- It brings hope that one day Revelation 21:4 will become a reality – “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

The gospel fundamentally sets people free. It sets people from their sin. It changes how they see a fallen world, and it changes what they hope for. The gospel brings hope.

Therefore it just makes sense the people who know and love the gospel should be the most concerned about the tragic effects of sin upon the world. It just makes sense that we would approach Sunday with this thought: “Jesus can change someone’s life today!” It just makes sense that followers of Jesus would be concerned about what is happening in our city, to be concerned about the needs of the unborn or the abuse and neglect of children and the elderly. It just makes sense that racism and poverty would make us weep.

We, of all people, should know that this is not the way that God intended for things to be. We, of all people, should know that these cultural malignancies are by-products of a world captured by sin. We, of all people, should know that Jesus has the ultimate answers for all of these problems. Right now he can change our hearts. One day, he’ll make it all right.

The followers of Jesus must know that they have to live the gospel in word and deed. You must have both. Preaching alone is not the answer, nor is compassion alone the answer. The church is a powerful force for change and a beautiful instrument for God’s glory when the content of the Gospel collides with the compassion of the Gospel.

⁶ Turner quoting Davies and Allison – page 139.

This is what Jesus emulates. This is what Jesus' ministry was all about. This is what Jesus' did. This is what we know about him. This is what we love about him. This is how we want to be.

And so College Park, I want to call you to be a follower of Jesus – to be light in darkness, to make a radical change, and to living out the gospel in word and deed. He's the One, the Messiah, the son of David, the Son of Abraham.

Matthew's aim is to tell you about Jesus. So that you will know him, love him, and be like him. The aim is to have you really be a follower of Jesus.

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com