

Us: Rehearsing Our Gospel Culture

What It Means to Follow Jesus

Matthew 4:12-25

Mark Vroegop

Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— 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." From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 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. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. 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. 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, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. (Matt. 4:12-25, ESV).

Over Christmas break and into the new year, I took some time for reflection. Many of you probably did the same thing to some extent. I skimmed over my 2023 journal, read through monthly emails that I send to the Lead Pastor Accountability Team, and I scrolled through my photos. It was a helpful and encouraging exercise.

It reminded me about some of my signature moments of the year. Do you have a few of those moments? I mean that kind of scenario where your heart was filled with deep gratitude and you sensed the blessing or presence of the Lord.

One of my signature moments in 2023 was while on sabbatical during our trip to Israel. For several reasons, I had high expectations of our visit to the Sea of Galilee. But to be honest, my expectations were too high. The sea was more like a lake. I could see across it. The shoreline wasn't peaceful. It was commercialized—almost like a small fair with noisy vendors, restaurants, and souvenir shops. Jet skis raced across the water. I wasn't getting any of the "feelsies." Frankly, I was disappointed.

Later that day, we were on a boat in the middle of the sea with worship music playing in the background, and the Lord met with me in a profound way. I realized that while the Sea of Galilee wasn't what I expected, maybe that's the point. Maybe following Jesus is a little less dramatic, more earthy, and more realistic.

Later that same day, we sat on the shore of Capernaum, the scene of our text this morning, and we sang "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus." As the waves lapped against the shore, seagulls called out above, and the afternoon wind picked up, it struck me how normal the scene really was. Somewhere along this coast, Peter, Andrew, James, and John walked away from their fishing boats to follow Jesus.

I'd like to start out 2024 by reflecting on what it means to follow Jesus.

We'll start our new series in 1 & 2 Samuel in two weeks. For the last few years, we've found it helpful to start the year by reviewing some foundational biblical truths regarding who we are as a church. What does it mean to be "us"? That's important because it's easy to forget. Mission drift can take place. But it's also important because we shouldn't assume that we all understand who our church is, why we exist, and what our unique role is in the community.

What's more, we've had 283 new people join our church, and our attendance reached a high at 3,700 in the fall of this year. So, reviewing a few things would be helpful so that we're all on the same page as we start the new year.

Our Mission

Every gospel-preaching church has the same mission. It's the Great Commission from Jesus:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:19-20).

At College Park, we distill those two verses into **igniting a passion to follow Jesus**.

It's our unique expression of the Great Commission. Our collective aim is to help people look more and more like Jesus. We prayerfully aim for the internal motivation (passion), knowing that we're just a small part of what the Spirit is going to do in people's lives (igniting).

Today I'd like to unpack the word "follow." And I'd like to invite you to consider what it means to follow Jesus. I'd especially like you to think about what it means to follow Jesus in 2024, and I'm going to invite you to consider some questions at the end of my sermon.

The Moment

Perhaps it's because I've stood on the shoreline of Capernaum, but I read Matthew 4 differently now. This passage about the calling of the first four disciples has a context, a situation, and a background. And it's really important. In fact, it's central to what it means to follow Jesus.

Matthew sets the context for us in verses 12-13. John the Baptist was arrested by Herod. You may remember that John was outspoken about Herod's improper marriage, and he will eventually be beheaded (Mark 6:14-29). Jesus moves to Galilee, just over 100 miles north of Jerusalem. This will become the base of operation for most of Jesus's ministry.

There are a few things to consider here. First, Matthew connects this move to the arrest of John. It's more than just a historical reference point. The threat from Herod must have been real and significant. Yet Matthew sees the political dynamics as part of God's sovereign plan. He cites Isaiah 9 as being fulfilled in this moment.

Second, Capernaum and the region of Galilee wouldn't be the most influential place to launch a national ministry. The area near Jerusalem might be more strategic. Galilee was an outlying area with both Jews and Gentiles calling it home. Further along the shore was the Decapolis, a collection of ten Hellenistic cities, populated mostly by Gentiles.

The region where Jesus began his ministry—the moment in which he began to preach “repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”—was really at the crossroads of Israelite life. And Jesus started his ministry there in a way that almost seems accidental or reactionary. But Matthew sees it as fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah.

Following Jesus always involves “a moment.” My guess is that if you are a Christian, you put your trust in Jesus because of a moment—a point in time when you realized that you were a sinner and that you needed a savior. And there were surely circumstances behind all of that. You may not yet be a Christian, and you're here today searching. This Sunday or at some point in the future, I hope you'll have “a moment” when you turn from your sins and are born again.

Following Jesus always involves a moment in time and location. Consider where our church is. We're located on 96th Street, right on the line between Carmel and Indianapolis. We draw people from all over the city. What a strategic place to be! We're in the crossroads of America and the capital city of our state with over two million people in the Carmel, Indianapolis, and Greenwood metro area. Our church is right on the line between the northern suburbs of Carmel and Indianapolis, an area with changing demographics. What a strategic location for the advancement of the gospel in our own Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth.

The year 2024 marks the thirty-ninth year of ministry since College Park was planted in Casino Room B of the Holiday Inn that used to be on 465 and Michigan Road. For sixteen years, our family has called the church home, and our lives have been deeply shaped by the beautiful community of our church. I'm a better disciple, husband, father, and pastor today because of “the moment” that I've shared with all of you.

In two weeks, our pastors and Elder Council will meet to talk about where we're headed in 2024, and I'll share more about some priorities in the next few months. But when I think about this moment for our church, I feel so much gratitude to the Lord, and I see so much opportunity before us.

The moment, however, isn't just about the church collectively. It's also about the church individually—you. I trust that you know that nothing in your life happens by accident. Everything in your life from when, where, and to whom you were born, to where you lived, to the gifts you have, to the people you know, and to the job you have are all part of God's design for you. You live in a moment in time. But that also relates to difficulties, suffering, pain, and hardship. All of it is part of God's design for your life so that you'd live on mission.

So, at the start of this year, I think it's good to pause and ask ourselves questions like:

- Where has God placed me?
- What might 2024 be like?
- What are the unique passions?
- Where might God use me?

Following Jesus takes place in real places, with real people, in real moments. Let's be careful not to overly spiritualize all of this. The Great Commission is lived out right where we are—in the moment.

The Mission

The next section of Matthew's Gospel (vv. 18-22) records the calling of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. They are not only the first disciples, but Peter, James, and John will become the inner circle of Jesus's ministry.

Matthew's account is fairly brief. Luke's description is a bit more involved, and it shows us that Jesus's calling didn't come out of nowhere.

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him (Luke 5:1-11).

This is background for Matthew's narrative. These disciples didn't follow Jesus haphazardly or blindly. They followed him willingly, passionately, and intentionally because of their experience with him.

Jesus's words to these men are important: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (v. 19). To "follow" means to come behind him, and it reflected the culture of the rabbis who had students who would learn from him as they lived with him.¹ Notice a few things about following:

- It involved a departure. They left their former lives behind.
- It required a decision. Matthew shows us that they responded quickly.
- It created a calling. Jesus called them to be fishers of men.

For the next three years, their lives would be interwoven with Jesus. Just think of the things that they saw and experienced. They heard his teaching, ate with people on the margins, witnessed healings, watched him literally walk on water, saw him raise the dead, experienced the judgment of the religious leaders, and beheld his glory in the transfiguration. Just think of everything that they saw and experienced. Following Jesus is incredibly exhilarating.

But they were also confused by his parables, they argued about who would be the greatest, and they regularly had their faith tested. Peter was rebuked and told "Get behind me, Satan." James and John wanted to call down fire on the city that rejected the message. They fell asleep in the garden when Jesus asked them to pray with him. Peter turned to violence when Jesus was arrested and denied him three times. Before his trial, all of them ran away.

The Gospel writers never make the disciples out to be heroes. They were ordinary people who were captivated by an extraordinary savior. Here's the thing about following Jesus: It's extraordinary and ordinary. It's unreal and real. It's heavenly and earthy. Following Jesus always involves embracing supernatural truth and making it work in natural ways.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). When I hear that verse, I tend to focus on Jesus as the truth and Jesus as the life. I hear his exclusive claim that no one comes to the Father without him. Those are incredible statements! They're life changing.

But I tend to miss the first one. Jesus is the way. Following Jesus and the "way" are linked together. The way is a path, a road, a means to a destination. It means that following Jesus not only involves truth; it requires a lifestyle. The way of Jesus relates to not only what we believe, but also to the way we live—how we talk, act, work, etc. The way of Jesus is the nitty-gritty of life. It works in the real world. This metaphor became so important that Luke uses it to refer to the early church. He calls it "The Way."

To follow Jesus means that the truths about Jesus affect us deeply and completely. At least that's supposed to happen. It's important to recognize that Judas "followed" Jesus, but he didn't truly follow Jesus. He was near Jesus's teaching and witnessed the miracles. He'd left behind things too. But something was missing in his soul. Somewhere along the journey, he decided to trade following Jesus

¹ R. T. France, [*Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 109.

for betraying Jesus. What was it? Was he disillusioned, power hungry, jealous, greedy? We don't exactly know. But what's clear is that he was with Jesus but he wasn't all-in on the Jesus "way." This should cause us to tremble. It should make us think. And it should make us pray.

We can only pray our lives into the way of following Jesus. This praying is, in large part, the Spirit praying in us. The way we follow must be internalized and embodied—prayer both internalizes and embodies Jesus; there is no other way into the Way. Judas followed Jesus with his feet all over Palestine, but it never got inside him; he was an opportunist to the end. Peter followed Jesus all over Palestine, but at the crisis in the garden he turned unaccountably into a zealot, swinging his sword with the best of them. Prayer is the way we get the following (not just the feeling!) inside us.²

That's one reason that we start the year with our 24-Hour Bible Reading and Prayer and why we have Prayer Week. It's an opportunity to slow down, wait on the Lord, and pray about what it means to follow Jesus.

So, what does following Jesus look like for you? If you are a Christian, being a follower of Jesus always involves a moment and a mission. Where are you? Where has God placed you? What is his calling on you? As you think about the answer to those questions, I'd like for you to consider some diagnostic questions:

1. What's one thing you could do this year to increase your enjoyment of God?
2. What's the most humanly impossible thing you will ask God to do this year?
3. What's the single most important thing you could do to improve the quality of your family life this year?
4. In which spiritual discipline do you most want to make progress this year, and what will you do about it?
5. What is the single biggest time-waster in your life, and what will you do about it this year?
6. What is the most helpful new way you could strengthen your church?
7. For whose salvation will you pray most fervently this year?
8. What's the most important way you will, by God's grace, try to make this year different from last year?
9. What one thing could you do to improve your prayer life this year?
10. What single thing that you plan to do this year will matter most in ten years? In eternity?

© 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

² Eugene H. Peterson, [*The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus Is the Way*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 265.