

A Call Back to Discipleship

by Todd Atkinson

This sermon reflects on the importance of discipleship, focusing on the call to follow Jesus and the three key aspects of discipleship: what to believe (theology), how to behave (morality), and how to bless God (worship). It emphasizes the need to align our lives with the teachings and passions of Jesus, leaving behind self-centeredness and embracing a life of submission and imitation of Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 4:19, Matthew 16:24, Luke 9:23, Matthew 28:19, John 13:34, Romans 12:1

Topics: "Discipleship", "Imitation of Christ"

Description

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Transcript

And so many of them asked if I could come visit them at the start of their year. And so three trips in three weeks was a little too much. I missed my family, I missed my church home, and so it's just lovely to be back.

As I was preparing this week, I was thinking back how that many years ago, I took time each week to go to a cabin in the mountains. And each week I'd spend one, two, or three days there praying. And I was really praying about a question, an insightful question that a couple of people in our congregation had asked me.

And I wanted to find an answer to that question. And the question was, what is our vision as a church? So I was doing lots of preaching and teaching and things that I thought were vision. But if I'm talking about things that I think are vision, and they're still asking me what is the vision, I knew I'm missing somewhere.

And I needed the time with the Lord to figure that out. And so one of the things that became evident to me during those prayer times is that it isn't necessarily our vision for the church that really matters, as much as it is the vision of Jesus. Because the church here, other places, belongs to him, it's his church.

And so that's the overriding question is, what is the vision of Jesus for his church? What does he want his church to be like? So I spent those days in the mountains looking back at the life story of Jesus, again with fresh eyes. And as I looked back to it, I simply asked this question, what were his greatest passions during

his earthly life and ministry? And I identified five. And it seemed like a foolproof plan to me, simply find those things that Jesus is most passionate about and make them our greatest passions, because how could you ever go wrong doing that? And so I'm still convinced about that plan, find the things that Jesus is most passionate about, and let's us make them our greatest passions in life, and then there's no way heaven could ever fall for us.

But they would only be proud of us. So we're still doing that. This came to be known in our church as the five passions, and everything in our church and movement is organized around them.

The more time that you spend here, the more you'll hear about them. Father Stephen actually began our year preaching on the five passions, of which I'm contributing today. And if you're new here, you'll notice these five paintings on the wall by Chandra.

And so there are explanations kind of at the back a little bit around the corner. There's an explanation about each one of them, but each one of them represents one of the five passions of Jesus. This week, we are looking at the second of the five passions.

It's got a few different titles, but I'm going to call it the passion for discipleship. We could call it the passion for teaching. They are very interrelated because Jesus was called the teacher, but the ones who were most receptive to his teaching were called disciples.

And so Jesus, the teacher, the disciples, the followers of Jesus, they are two sides of the very same coin. So, but for my purposes this morning, I'm going to call it the passion for discipleship. The very first followers of Jesus were called disciples.

So this morning, I want to look at where their story began. How did they become disciples? What did that mean for them to be disciples? And through their stories, how do we today hear from Jesus a renewed call to our own discipleship? The story that was read aloud for us this morning begins with Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee, and upon seeing two brothers out there in a fishing boat, he calls aloud to them, follow me. These two simple words change these fishermen's lives forever.

When they heard those words, what do you think would have went through their mind? Follow me, Jesus on this edge of the Sea of Galilee, two simple words, but boy did those words pack a punch. What would have went through their mind? Of course, Scripture doesn't explicitly lay that out for us, but I think I've got some good reasons of what might have went through their mind. First, I think it's important to understand that this was not their only exposure to Jesus.

If you read all four gospel accounts, a fuller picture emerges, and we see that Jesus had become something of a local celebrity in this area. He is doing remarkable things. Word about him is spreading through the whole region.

People are becoming familiar with him. He was leaving a distinct mark, and people were beginning to ask the question, could this be the Messiah of God? Could this be the one that our people have waited for for centuries? Could this be the one that God has sent for our salvation? So when Jesus said to these men, follow me, they recognized him when he said those words. They maybe weren't personally acquainted with him yet, but they certainly recognized him.

They have some idea who this epic figure in their region is. So when he says to them, follow me, I think they must have looked over their shoulders, wondering who he was speaking to. Because fishermen were

not esteemed in their society.

They felt terribly unimportant. So much was said in so few words. When Jesus said, follow me, what did that entail except like, he sees me? The disciple or the fishermen before their disciples felt very invisible.

They were thought to have performed one task in their society, and one alone, which is the provision of food. But they weren't thought to matter themselves as people. You wanted the fish, you didn't want the fishermen.

And so here Jesus says, follow me, he sees us. He values us. Why does he want me? He sees something in us.

He wants our company. Follow me. They were to become Jesus' closest earthly companions.

No one had ever treated these men like that. No one had ever seen that in them, worth or potential. No one had ever spoke to that before.

No one had ever wanted their intimate companionship before. Certainly not a person that seemed to be a person of importance. There is so much they did not know about Jesus at this point.

But there are some things that they were pretty sure that they did know about him. Number one, they did know that Jesus was like, unlike anyone they had ever encountered before. Unlike anyone that they'd even heard of before.

Who is this man? They did know that no one had ever sought them out, called out their names, invited them, initiated toward them. No one had ever done that to them before. And they did know that if they passed up this opportunity, that they may never get another one like it.

And so they responded in an absolutely exemplary way, which is partially what makes them the original disciples. It's why we're looking at their life again today. Because they are models and exemplars for us.

For us, who in our day, in our age, are still hearing the voice of Jesus saying to us, to you, to me, follow me. And maybe here this morning, it may be for the very first time you hear that voice. It may not be an audible voice.

It may be a voice in your heart. But Jesus is still saying to people, follow me. Perhaps there was an earlier time of your life when you heard that voice.

May not have been those exact words, but it was the essence. It was the call of Jesus on your life, inviting you to himself, inviting you to belong to him and to walk with him. And so maybe this morning is a time for covenant renewal.

It's a time for you to renew your life as a disciple. It's a time to renew your calling, your journey of discipleship. Follow me.

When you hear those words, how do you respond? When you hear the voice of Jesus pulling, tugging, inviting, how do you respond to that? Well, I'll tell you how the original disciples responded. The Bible says immediately. They left their nets and they followed him.

Immediately without delay. Without hesitation. Without suspicion.

Without reservation. Without thinking first of how to play the angles. Immediately.

Second, it says they left their nets. This is all that they knew. They were fishermen.

This is probably something, an industry that was handed down from generation to generation, which is why in one case their father was with them in the boat. This was everything their lives had amounted to. Everything they had put their trust in and everything they thought their future would look like was in that boat.

Their livelihood, their hopes, their sense of identity, who they were in their society. Immediately they left their nets behind. Jumped into the water.

Heeded the invitation of Jesus. Made their way to him. And it says and they followed him.

Immediately they left their nets and they followed him. What does it mean to say that they followed him? It's a phrase that we might use but maybe not in the exact same way. Sometimes we say we follow a certain sports team.

Which means we cheer for them. That is not what following Jesus means. Being a disciple is not just being a fan of Jesus.

Though some people might think of it like that or treat it like that. Christianity is not a spectator sport. Something that you do from back and just cheer for him and the great things he does.

These disciples from this day began to walk with him, live with him, travel with him, learn from him. They were not spectators. In other instances we may say well we followed someone or we followed the car ahead of us.

That means to trail behind. That also, that is not what following Jesus means. Being a disciple is not following Jesus from a safe distance.

No, something very different is meant here when the Bible says they followed him. In the first century this was an invitation, follow me, an invitation to enter into a student-teacher relationship. Relationship and not the kind of student-teacher relationship we would have at school or university which means we show up hopefully on time, we listen attentively, we take it in, we write exams.

It was more of an apprenticeship, a close relationship where a student would become attached to a teacher for life in order to learn from them and to become like them. That's what is entailed in these words. When he says follow me, they understood in their society here's a teacher, big teacher, an official teacher, someone who's inviting us to become apprentices, to learn under him, to live with him and to learn from him.

I understand a little about this. When I was just 17 I met an evangelistic figure from Great Britain. He was preaching in Canada, felt like the Lord pointed me out to him in a crowd, spoke to me afterwards and at the end of that year of theological training asked me if I would move to England and become his apprentice.

So I, with him and his wife, a group of people that would go around preaching the gospel, so I literally lived with them, I apprenticed with them. It wasn't a distant student-teacher relationship. I traveled with them, I ate with them, I preached and I learned in a very, very close proximity.

And in many ways I became like him. His name was Tony Stone, Dr. Tony Stone, and many of the places I preached they would call me Little Tony, not because I did not used to be a short fellow, meaning I was a reflection of the person I was apprenticing under. That's what I did.

I moved to England, did an apprenticeship, learned under the closest circumstances. And so maybe that's a little closer to what the Bible means when it says, and they followed him. They left their nets, they lived with him, they ate with him, they traveled with him, they learned from him, they watched his every move.

And so a disciple is one who would follow Jesus in such a way as to take on his manner of life. It was someone who would live like he lived, who would do as he did, who would imitate his deeds. Remember, we're not just studying the original disciples, we're asking ourselves the question, how is our discipleship? So they did this so well, imitating his life, that later on they become to be known as Christians, which meant Little Christ.

They imitated him so well that people could see the connection. The disciples called Jesus the teacher. That meant that his teaching had absolute authority for them.

So in this apprenticeship, this disciple relationship, they didn't choose what they would listen to and what they wouldn't, where they would go and when they didn't. There was a deep sense of submission to the teacher. His teaching had absolute authority for them, whether his teaching pertained to what God was really like, the true nature of God, whether his teaching pertained to how to treat people, how to pray, how to forgive people, marriage, the list could be gone.

Everything he taught had authority for them, over every area of life. We go to school and a teacher teaches a specific area. They are a biology teacher.

They are a history teacher. But Jesus was the one who was their ultimate teacher, taught them all about life and everything he said, every word of it as well. Because he was the teacher that came from God, there was divine authority there to teach on everything and anything, and it all was true, whatever subject he touched upon.

Because it was the teaching of God the creator. In fact, if we had to summarize Jesus' teaching into three categories, we would see that he taught his disciples three things. We'll have a, look at, I'm feeling very contemporary today.

I have a PowerPoint. I'm not saying this in any self-congratulating way, but I made the PowerPoint. Okay, if you want to congratulate, just a little.

Last night at 11 o'clock at night, it did not seem fair to send Amy Ron an email saying, could you create a PowerPoint for me? So I had to learn to do this. I did that. So just, sort of back to discipleship.

So this isn't my three categories, actually. These are the three categories that we're going to look at. That were used by the early church.

So when the early church would disciple people, called catechism, when they would prepare people for baptism, when Jesus spoke to people and said, come and follow me, and people in the ancient Roman Empire said, you bet I'd love to follow him. What do I do? This is what the church would teach them, these three categories. What to believe, how to behave, and how to bless God.

So let's talk about these three, how to believe. So I put this on the right because if you're new to church, I don't want our technical language to be intimidating to you. You may not know what that word means.

I didn't grow up in a church, so I wouldn't have understood what the word theology meant. So Jesus taught them what to believe. He actually taught them what don't believe.

That's why the only one that could teach what God was really like was the son of God. Because in biblical terms, son means one who has the nature of his father. One who is like his father.

And so it was the son of God came to reveal what God was really like, what his real nature was like. And it really mattered that if they were going to heed the call to follow him, if they're going to believe in God, they had to have correct understandings of what God was really like. Have you ever had something at work ever happen, and you've met somebody, and you could tell that before you met them, someone else had got to them, and so that somehow they've told something about you, and you can tell they do not have an accurate idea of you in their heads.

They do not see you rightly. When that happens, how does relationship go afterwards? How easy it is for you to meet that new person when they've already been affected by someone else's thoughts about you. How does that go for you? Not very well at all, does it? Because they have a wrong idea of what you're like, and the wrong idea of what you're like debilitates true relationship.

Jesus came to a day where people had a very wrong understanding of what God was like, and so as long as they had wrong beliefs in their head of what God was really like, how could they ever be in a true relationship with him? And so the very first reason Jesus came was to teach what God was really like, to reveal his truest and fullest nature to us. And so if you want to know what God is really like, everything about him, without any doubt, we look into the face of Jesus, and we know exactly what God is like. And so he taught them, this is what God is like.

This is what to believe about God. We call that theology. And so theology actually matters.

It's important to have a correct understanding of what God is really like, and not an incorrect understanding of that. What about the second one, though? He didn't just teach them what to believe. He also taught his disciples how to behave.

Morality just means what is right and what is wrong. And so if you go to the very next chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, after this call, Jesus taught something called the Beatitudes. And in the Beatitudes, it's really about how they treat people, how they think about people, how they behave, how they carry themselves.

Jesus said to them, you have heard in the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments, it was said, thou shall not murder. And then Jesus says, but I say to you, don't even call someone a fool. Don't degrade people.

Yeah, yeah, of course you shouldn't murder, but I am going to give you an ethic. I'm going to give you a morality that is far above the Ten Commandments. Don't murder people in your heart.

Don't murder people with your words. Don't kill people, but don't even kill their self-esteem. Don't kill their self-worth.

And so we live in a day where people may understand, number two, I would like to know what God is really like, but don't tell me what's right and wrong. So there were two different groups of people that are mentioned in the Gospels. They're not in opposition to one another.

But if you think of it as concentric circles, the circle around Jesus, closer to Jesus, called the disciples, and then there's another group of people called the crowd. If you read an older translation of the Bible, they would be called the multitudes. And so the multitudes are listening.

They're intrigued by His teaching. They actually got to see miracles. But they're not sure yet whether they want to be disciples.

They're not sure whether they want to fully heed the call to follow Him and throw themselves into a life of holy apprenticeship. And so many people from the crowds became disciples, but they didn't all make that move. There once was a young ruler who came to Jesus and asked him the question, a young lawyer, what should I do to inherit eternal life? He's really asking about question number one.

Tell me the truth. How do you get into heaven? And so Jesus answers his question. The young lawyer says, I've done all those things.

What else should I do? Jesus responds, sell all your money and give it to the poor. Jesus didn't say that to everybody, but He said it to this rich young ruler because He understood that this was the great obstacle of His life. The Bible says, He went away sad because you can tell me how to get to heaven, but don't tell me what to do with my money, or don't tell me how to think about my money.

And he walked away sad. If you have a little bit of time to spend this week, you might want to ask yourself a question. You can Google this.

I did this part of my preparation. Ask yourself, what was the morality of the Roman Empire? When these young disciples and many others after them became Christians, what life had they known before that? So I just Googled morality or ethics of the Roman Empire. You want to be careful how deep you read because you're going to hear repeated words like promiscuity, depravity, obscenity.

You are going to hear those and a whole other host of words repeated. So you think the morality of our day is mixed up. You should see what first century Rome was like.

Why do I raise that? Because when these people became Christians, when they believed upon Jesus and they said, yes, I will follow you and become disciples, they did not bring with them the morality of the Roman Empire, the morality that they had known growing up, the morality of contemporary culture. They did not bring it with them. When they said, yes, I want to become a disciple, the church taught them what a Jesus morality was like, how Jesus thinks about good and bad and constructive lifestyles, destructive lifestyles.

And so God in Christ gave them a completely new way of thinking about how they were to live their life. And so when they fully became disciples, which was identified at their baptism, that's why they were washed with water, is because their old life of paganism, their old Roman ways of thinking about things were washed away from them. So don't be under any illusion.

A Christian morality is a unique morality. We're not trying to imitate the Roman Empire. We're washed from it.

We're not trying to imitate the world in which we live. We're washed of it. The same one who taught us what God is really like is also teaching us a sense of what's right and wrong.

And he has the authority to do that. The third category. We had to summarize Jesus' teaching into three categories, what to believe, how they behaved, and how to bless God, which means how to worship.

How to worship. If the first category is about having our attitudes, our minds in submission to Christ, and if the second attitude is about having our actions in submission to Christ, this category is about having our affections in submission to Christ. And so the word spirituality gets thrown around a lot.

We're talking about a unique, distinctive Christian spirituality. And the reason I raise this is because we can get it right on number one. People have correct understanding of what God is like, but do not feel close to him at all.

They could have it right on number two. I treat people like Jesus would have me treat people, and still not love people or love God like they'd like. So in that case, number two becomes something else, and it becomes a system of rules, as opposed to a part, a component of discipleship.

But number three is about having our affections ordered. It's about relating to God. It's about coming into his presence.

It's about having a heart that's close to him. And what I want to say to you, beloved, is that we live in a society that wants to pick and choose between those, and I want to say to you, you cannot do that. Because if the life of a discipleship is about living a life of submission to Jesus, you are not in submission if you say, well, I'll, how about one of the three? So we have people in our society, and we all have the human, same human nature, which means we would all want to do this.

I want to have a good spirituality. I want to be close to God. I don't think doctrine or theology is that important, and I feel impinged upon when Jesus tries to speak to me about moral issues, but I still want to be close to God.

Or I want to have correct theology and do what I want to do, but worship, it feels a little emotional. I don't like the language of intimacy. And there is a reason why he taught all three.

In the early church, when they would prepare people for baptism, there were also symbols of each of these three. Anybody know what was it that embodied the theological part? Number one. Anybody been through our catechism? There was a concise statement of Christian beliefs.

It might be on the wall over there. The Apostles' Creed. That was a succinct statement of what Christians believe about God.

And that's why when you get baptized, why there's a, why the Apostles' Creed features highly in that. In the early church, when they prepare people for baptism, anybody know what a concise statement of Christian morality was? I'm sure you've been through this in Corpus or somewhere. Rob's sweating.

What was the concise statement about, that would give us ideas of what a Christian morality might look like? Big red. The Ten Commandments. And I want to suggest, you will not understand the Ten Commandments right if you don't understand the Beatitudes.

Because Jesus actually took the Ten Commandments and then actually does something even more wonderful by talking about the intents of the heart in the Beatitudes. And is there anybody that knows what was the concise statement of unique, distinctive Christian spirituality in the early church that kind of captured what it meant to relate rightly to God? Pardon? The Lord's Prayer. I assure you I get no money for this.

But someone in our movement, part of the Via Vancouver church plant, Sarah Maynard, just this last week came out with a book on the Lord's Prayer. Sarah Maynard has been a significant intercessor in our country. She has run Red Leaf Prayer.

So she leads about 400 or 500 intercessors across our country. And as she got to Novia and the things that we love and this kind of teaching, she never really thought of the Lord's Prayer as being one of the greatest things. She led prayer all across our country and never really thought of the Lord's Prayer as being central to that.

So this has been a major epiphany for her. And if you Google Sarah Maynard, the Lord's Prayer, you'll realize outside of here, she's teaching in every venue across our country. She's teaching on the importance of the Lord's Prayer and how to become intimate with God through the Lord's Prayer.

So her book is called The Prayer of All Prayers. You might want to read that. I'm not sure if that's okay to do with the book.

I'm not trying to make her money or anything. But when people write a book or something like this, we draw a bit of attention to it. The Lord's Prayer.

So I want to ask you a question today. If you are new here today, checking out Christianity as it were, in some way, might you hear the voice of Jesus calling to you saying, I'd like you to follow me. And when he says those words, what does that generate in your heart? I hope the same thing as the original disciples.

You want me? You would have me? You see me? You value me? You want to do life and eternity with me? And I hope that immediately you'd leave your nets and follow him and become his apprentices and learn to be like him. Maybe the majority, I would guess, of us here today have made that decision at some earlier time of life. And so my question to you is, how is your discipleship going? Because there are all kinds of things that can cut short our discipleship.

We might look back and say, I felt like I was on that train and it was so encouraging. And you yourself might not know what happened. Sometimes we have something in life that feels gravely disappointing happening.

And we all have those things happen. And sometimes it takes some time looking back to realize how that grave disappointment affected us. But one of the effects it often have upon us that we might not realize for some time is that it caused us to look inward.

I don't mean just for a moment of reflection or evaluation, but it caused us, it turned us in on ourselves. Where suddenly life became about me and about self-preservation because I had a disappointment and a loss and I'm tired of disappointments and it turns us in on ourselves, which is the antithesis of discipleship. When you become a disciple, you don't turn in, you turn up.

You live a life turned upwards, not inwards. Which is exactly why Jesus said these words. If any of you want to come follow me and be my disciple, you must deny yourself.

Self takes a different place. Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. And so for some of us, we may have to realize that I have suddenly become turned inward on myself.

And maybe I'll ask the question, how is it working for you? Because when we do that, it takes some time. We do it to preserve ourselves, but give you six months and we feel horrible on the inside. Jesus said if any man wants to lose his life, give it away to me, he will find life.

But if he tries to save or preserve it, he will lose it. It's like taking a hand of sand. The harder you squeeze and hang on, the more it runs through your fingers.

And so the moment we make life all about me, we lose what life is actually about. So before we move on to the table, if you're new here today, you've never said I'll follow you, Jesus. I urge you to make this day your day.

And while we go into prayers, in your own way say, Jesus, I want to follow you. I want to be your disciple. I give you my life.

But if you're here today and feel like discipleship maybe doesn't play the same role in your life it once did, maybe you pray a different prayer. Lord, I'm not sure what happened. I'm not sure where on the inside, something got a little bit off track.

I don't know what turns me so inward. But I once again give my life to you. I give my time to you.

I give my nets, my livelihood, my business, my family, my energies, my passions, my thoughts, my affections, how I think about you, how I treat others, how I love. I give it back to you. Because I have found a joy in that.

And a rightness and satisfaction that recently I have lost.

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