

I'm not sure if it is a true story or not... but S. I. McMillen... in his book *None of These Diseases*... tells a story of a young woman who wanted to go to college. ... Her heart sank when she read the question on the application blank that asked, "*Are you a leader?*"

Being both honest and conscientious... she wrote... "No," and returned the application... expecting the worst. ... But to her surprise... she received this letter from the college: "*Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower.*"

In terms of being a Christian... (let me ask)... would you consider yourself a follower...? Even though Christ has issued the life changing call... "Follow me!"... what does it mean to be a Christ-follower...?

Listen to these words of A.W. Tozer...

The whole transaction of religious conversion has been made mechanical and spiritless. Faith may now be exercised without a jar to the moral life and without embarrassment to the Adamic ego. Christ may be "received" without creating any special love for Him in the soul of the receiver. The man is "saved" but he is not hungry nor thirsty after God. In fact he is specifically taught to be satisfied and encouraged to be content with little.

Further on in this same article that he titled "The Pursuit of God" Tozer wrote...

Everything is made to center on the initial act of accepting Christ (a term, incidentally, which is not found in the Bible) and we are not expected thereafter to crave any further revelation of God to our

souls. We have been snared in the coils of a spurious logic which insists that if we have found Him, we need no more to seek Him."

To have found Christ – and yet... to still pursue Him... (to still seek Him)... sounds like a paradox. But it is exactly what it means... to be a Christ-follower. The point of this morning's message... is to deliberately encourage a mighty longing after God... that we would be Christ-followers.

At the center of our passage of study today in Matthew... Jesus calls His disciples with two simple words – "Follow Me." This passage helps us see what it means to follow Jesus... at the most basic level. In response to this passage... we should be asking ourselves the question... "Am **I** following Him?" No more important question can be asked... by anyone who considers themselves to be a Christian.

What holds us back when Jesus calls us? ... Why are we so slow and cautious when the Creator beckons us? ... Very few of us are asked to give up our livelihood for the sake of Jesus.... Not many will have to relinquish the bond of family for Jesus. ... Yet our Lord does ask us to follow Him. Surely the One who saved us is worthy of our undivided loyalty and commitment. ... May God grant us spiritual insight to perceive our Savior's call... and the fortitude to respond like Peter and Andrew... James and John.

Now here are few insights about the circumstances that surround our passage. Where we pick up with today's action... Jesus has already been in public ministry for a year. ... Between the first half of Matthew chapter 4... (which is what we studied the last time... and learned about the Satan tempting Christ in the wilderness)... and the second half of

Matthew chapter 4... (where we are today... and will see the calling of Jesus' first disciples)... about six months have passed... However one out of Jesus' total of only three years of public ministry has already taken place. ... If you would like to read about Jesus' first year... before He began traveling with His disciples... you can read the Gospel of John... from John 1:19 through John 3:36. ... There you would read about the wedding at Cana... and the first time that Jesus cleansed the Temple... (by the way... did you know that He cleansed the Temple once... in His first year of ministry and then again ... right after His triumphal entry... during the week He was crucified?)... Another event that happened in Jesus' first year... was His late night conversation with the leader of the Jews... who was named "Nicodemus."

The writer of this gospel we are studying – Matthew... is not writing about the events of Jesus' life in chronological order. He is not writing in the sequence of time by which they happened. Matthew writes... by arranging the events by topic. When Jesus moved His base of operation up North... to the regions of Galilee... it was because of John the Baptist's imprisonment. ... It was inevitable that John's public ministry would fade once Christ was on the scene... because John was simply the herald of Jesus Christ. ... So when Christ came on the scene... and some folk wondered about the increasing fame of Christ... and the decreasing fame of John... John replied, *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* (John 3:30). ... The imprisonment of John was the ultimate of the *"decrease,"* for it stopped John's public ministry completely.

John was cast into prison because of his high moral stand against Herod's marriage to Herodias. *"Herod had laid hold on John, and bound him, and*

put him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife. For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her" (Matthew 14:3,4). Herodias' scandalous life (especially with Herod Antipas) ended her marriage to Philip. Then she married Herod Antipas (who had to get a divorce from his Nabatean wife to marry Herodias—a divorce that caused great political fallout between Aretas, the ruler of the Nabateans and father of Herod's first wife).

Matthew 4:12

John the Baptist's ministry lasted somewhere between four and eighteen months, during which time he accomplished the mission to which God had called him. He caught the attention of the nation, awakened its conscience, and baptized and introduced the Messiah. John also stirred up the wrath of Herodias and Herod by denouncing their illegal marriage.

Now the heralded Messiah was preaching and the Baptist was in prison—a most unlikely end (he must have thought)... to his fearless ministry.

No move was made to secure his release. He was in jail. Matthew said more about all this later... but here he mentioned the imprisonment in order to show the effect it had on Christ. He left Judea for Galilee... putting Himself outside the reach of Herod. It was a sensible move.

John's ministry was over... but he was not abandoned. Soon he would earn a martyr's crown and enter into his eternal reward. Christ had not come to battle the Herods of this world - on their terms. ... Jesus certainly had the

power to blast Herod... his fortress... and every soldier in his army into oblivion... but He had not come to do those kinds of things—this time.

Jesus left the area of Judea and traveled northward to Galilee. The Jewish leaders considered Galilee “socially unacceptable.” ... They believed that the people of Galilee were good for manual labor and providing soldiers. However... the religious leaders would not stain their clothes with the dust of its roads. Jesus did not feel this way. This was his home.

Galilee was cut off from the theological movers-and-shakers of Jerusalem. Any Jew who was a “somebody” ... was closely tied to the bastion of Jerusalem. The further away you lived... the less important you were. Galilee was way up North... and was seen as impure... because there were so many Gentiles in... or nearby.

Galilee had never been wholly Jewish. Solomon had given twenty Galilean cities to Hiram, king of Tyre. ... Then it had constant invasions and settlement by Gentiles... so the area had a mixed population. People from the more racially pure cities of Judea (especially Jerusalem)... looked with scorn on Galilee and ridiculed the Galilean accent.

By leaving Judea and settling in Galilee... Jesus made a significant gesture. It was an indication of His worldwide purpose.

Matthew 4:13

Jesus first went to Nazareth (the small town in which he was raised.) ... It was the territory that Jacob’s son Zebulun (and his descendants) were given. ... From Matthew's account... we can only wonder why he left his

hometown and went to Capernaum. ... But the answer to this question is found in Luke's gospel.

As was his custom... Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and told the people of Nazareth that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 61:1-2). ... This revelation angered the people who... for all His life... had been his neighbors and friends. ... They became so incensed at this breach of Jewish protocol... that they sought to kill him... by throwing Him off a cliff... just outside the city (Luke 4:28-30).

Probably in light of these hostilities in Nazareth (which Luke describes)... Jesus established His home (and ministry base) in Capernaum. So He moved from the territory that was given to Zebulun... and He re-locates to the territory that was given to another son of Jacob – Naphtali.

Nazareth was a small agricultural village – one of the least important cities in the least important area of Galilee. ... Capernaum (on the other hand) was much larger... and it had a very wealthy fishing business economy. It was also closer to a major Roman highway... on which there were constant Gentile travelers. ... This may have been a strategic move on Jesus' part to move here. ... But this we do know... it fulfilled prophecy.

Matthew 4:14-16

The prophecy in verses fifteen and sixteen is a quote from the prophet Isaiah, written nearly seven hundred years earlier. It is a combination of two passages—Isaiah 9:1-2 and 42:7:

Isaiah 9:1-2 (ESV)

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former

time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

Isaiah 42:7 (ESV)

to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

How did Jesus bring this Light to Galilee? ... We are told several verses later... in Matthew 4:23: through His teaching, preaching, and healing. This will be a constant emphasis that we will see often in the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew 4:17

John was in prison and Jesus was in Capernaum. "From that time," Matthew said, "Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Herod had silenced one voice and now a far more powerful voice was heard. That voice began exactly where the other had been stopped. The message was the same.

The Herods of this world can never silence the voice of God. They can kill the preacher, but they cannot kill the preaching. As the old American abolitionists put it, "His truth goes marching on."

Repentance was the core of Christ's message... and the matter was always one of urgency. ... People needed to change their perspectives from worldliness to godliness... and their behavior from sinfulness to righteousness. ... The kingdom of God was in their midst in the person of Christ.

The sense of urgency is like that very sobering thought that people in yours and my past have challenged us with: if you only had one more day to live, what would you do? ... If the question catches us in a moment of honest reflection... we have to answer that we would change the way we think about this life... and we would behave very differently... knowing that our time on earth is short.

Immediately on the heels of this call by Jesus for people to repent... Matthew recounted the events that surrounded the call that Jesus placed on His first disciples. ... The startling observation that we all need to make... as we read the next several verses... is the quickness of the response of those whom Jesus called. ... Peter and Andrew (you will see) immediately left the only livelihood that they understood... and for which they had been prepared. ... In addition to leaving their livelihood... James and John also left their father. ... It seems as though nothing would stand between these men and the Lord.

Matthew 4:18-19

During the first year of Jesus' ministry... before Jesus' call to Peter and Andrew... John 1:29-42 demonstrates a previous encounter Jesus had with these men. They had already expressed their trust in Jesus... and had gone back to their fishing business. Now... we see Jesus call them to give up their fishing business and follow Him. ... The time had come... for them to make a life commitment. ... And what a commitment Jesus called for...!

Most people in Jewish Palestine (for their substance) depended on salted fish... wheat and barley. Fish products... like fish gravies were also common. ... Fishermen were central to the Galilean economy and made a

good living by the standards of their culture, far better than the large numbers of peasants who worked the land through much of the Roman Empire. ... So make no mistake... Jesus asked them to give up a lot... to become His followers.

The call to discipleship was an unconditional, unexplained demand, not a polite, reasoned invitation. Following Jesus involved both traveling with him and ethically obeying his teaching and modeling of God's will. It could and did lead to hardship and peril (which becomes obvious in the weeks to come of this study... in Matthew.)

But the wonder of it all... is that Jesus called men like this. I have always felt that since He called imperfect men like the disciples were... He may be able to use me... and He may be able to use you. ... It is encouraging to know that we don't have to be super-duper saints to be used by Him.

Matthew 4:20

The two men needed no further persuasion. They had already seen enough of Jesus to be convinced that He was indeed the Messiah. It was the chance of a lifetime to be called to be charter members of the impending kingdom. At that time they had no idea that the Lord was headed not toward a throne, but toward a tomb; they did not know that what lay ahead of Him was a cross, not a crown.

But there was no delay in obeying Christ's calling. It is the only way to respond to Divine commands. Delay is disobedience and delinquency.

Matthew 4:21-22

Farther down the lake were James and John... the sons of Zebedee. Zebedee was a prosperous fisherman... with a number of men on his payroll. (When the gospel writer Mark tells this same story in Mark 1:20... he writes that they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants). ... And because of the fact that John personally knew Annas the high priest (at the Trial of Jesus in John 18:15)... we can infer... that this family with a fishing business... was quite well-to-do.

Here in Matthew 4:21 is the only place in Scripture where we meet Zebedee in person. ... He raised no objection to his two sons' leaving the family business—walking right off the job... never to come back to it—in order to follow the carpenter from Nazareth who claimed to be Israel's Messiah. What a noble man he must have been!

Matthew 4:23-25

The effect of such a ministry grew by exponential proportions. As Jesus' reputation continued to ripple throughout the region, more and more people left the normal routines of their daily lives and sought to meet this man. It appeared that no disease or demon could stand against his word or his touch. The sick were relieved of their diseases. Demons were cast out. Those who were paralyzed could walk again. This verse states that Jesus healed everyone who was brought to him. No one was sent away in the same condition in which he or she had arrived.

If we will pay attention to the text, we will find that there were not just a few isolated cases, but thousands of folk were healed. That is the reason the

enemies of Jesus never questioned His miracles -- there were too many of them walking around.

Jesus was teaching, preaching, and healing. These were the three main aspects of his ministry. *Teaching* shows Jesus' concern for understanding; *preaching* shows his concern for commitment; and *healing* shows his concern for wholeness. His miracles of healing authenticated his teaching and preaching, proving that he truly was from God. ... The miracles of the Lord Jesus immediately distinguished Him from John the Baptist... who did no miracles.

In light of everything we know about Jesus from the first four chapters of Matthew... we should feel the wonder and weight of the One who gives this invitation... this command... to four fishermen to "Follow Me." ... This is Jesus... the Savior... the Messiah... the One promised to come in the kingly line of David and from Abraham... the father of Israel. ... He was the One to Whom wise men from the nations bow down... the One whose birth and life are the culmination of generations of prophecy... and anticipation. He is the Savior King and Righteous Judge of the world... perfectly filled with God's Spirit and loved by God the Father. He is the only true Son that Israel could never be.

There is only one conclusion to draw when we hear the invitation "Follow Me": **Jesus is worthy of far more than church attendance and casual association.** We have such a dangerous tendency to reduce Jesus to a poor, puny Savior who is just begging for you and me to accept Him into our lives. As if Jesus needs to be accepted by us! Jesus doesn't need our

acceptance; He is infinitely worthy of all glory in the whole universe, and He doesn't need us at all. We need Him.

We don't dare patronize Jesus... as if we can receive Him and not have a special love for Him that wants to pursue Him. **He is worthy of total abandonment and supreme adoration.** We're talking about the Savior King of the universe and Righteous Judge of all nations—God in the flesh—saying, "Follow Me."

That thought alone is mind-boggling. There is no potential *casual* response to Jesus. It's either "turn and run" or "bow and worship." ... Everything is different once you meet this King. ... That's why we know that people who profess to be Christians... but whose lives look just like the rest of the world - are *lying*.

Many people claim to have made a decision... prayed a prayer... signed a card... walked an aisle... accepted Jesus into their hearts... but their lives don't look any different. ... These people say they're Christians... but the reality is that they've never met Jesus. ... Because when you do... everything changes.

Matthew is clear that to follow Jesus... means to **live with radical abandonment for His glory.** ... We do what Jesus calls everyone to do - "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" ... That word "repent" means to admit your sin (confession)... to express sorrow over your sin (contrition)... and to turn from your sin (conversion). Repentance means to completely renounce your dependence on self... and we see

what renouncing a dependence on self looks like from these four disciples in today's passage.

The early disciples left behind everything that was familiar and natural for them. They exchanged comfort for uncertainty. They didn't know *where* they would be going; they only knew *who* they would be with. All followers of Christ must respond to this same call today. We may not always know all the details about *where* Christ is leading us... but we do know *who* we're following.

Just like these disciples... He calls us to re-orient our life's direction (and maybe even our life's work.) ... Most certainly we need to re-orient ourselves to the things we seek (such as status.)

In Jesus' day... disciples would attach themselves to a rabbi to promote themselves. Discipleship could be a step up the ladder toward greater status and position. But this wasn't the case with these early disciples; they were stepping down the ladder. They would eventually find this out when the One they were following was tried and killed.

In addition to leaving behind comfort... careers... possessions... and position... we also... sometimes have to leave behind our families (who do not like the fact that we are followers of Christ)... our friends (in the same way)... and our safety.

Obedience to Christ is costly. Following Him must be put even before our own physical security. Martin Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress" says it well: "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever."

Now let me be very careful here: I am not saying, and I would not say based on the whole of the New Testament, that all followers of Jesus must lose their careers, sell or give away all their possessions, leave their families behind, and physically die for the gospel. But the New Testament is absolutely clear that for all who follow Jesus, comfort and certainty in this world are no longer your concerns. Your career revolves around whatever Jesus calls you to do and however He wants to use you to spread the good news of the kingdom. Your possessions are not your own, and you forsake material pleasure in this world in order to live for eternal treasure in the world to come. And this *could* mean that you sell or give away everything you have. After all, position is no longer your priority.

When it comes to family... the Bible is clear that you are to honor your parents (Eph 6:1-3; Exod 20:12)... love your spouse (Eph 5:22-33)... and provide for your children (1 Tim 5:8). ... So don't use a command like "Follow Me" to justify being a lousy husband... wife... or parent.

The costly call to abandon everything for Jesus can be stated another way. We lay down all things so that **we live for one thing: to honor the King**. To follow Jesus means to hold loosely to everything else and to cling tightly to the person of Christ and the mission of His kingdom.