

# Follow Me!

Psalm 23:1-6, Matthew 4:12-25

Jesus says, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." In him, the light of God shines on all of us who have dwelt in a land of deep darkness and the shadow of death. In him, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He comes to claim us as his own, to recruit us as his followers, and to build us into his kingdom. He calls on us to spread his good word and to fill his church.

It is good news that Jesus Christ is the light of God shining into the darkness of our lives. We have known the valley of the shadow of death. We have known the threat of disease and the loss of loved ones. We have known the reality of decay, decline, and destruction. We have looked into the hard face of our own mortality. We have known the guilt of our sin: rejection, rebellion, falsehood, and betrayal.

And yet, none of these have the last word about who we are, whose we are, what we are about, or what we are going to do. God has made us his own, and the enemies of God shall not take us away. God sent Jesus Christ to reclaim us as his own, and the enemies of God shall not prevail against him. Jesus died to take away our sin. And God raised him to new life to promise us life beyond death, life beyond disease, life beyond pain, life beyond estrangement, life beyond sin, and life beyond darkness. This gives us good hope to live today. We do not place our confidence in human potential or accomplishment. Instead, we look to the power, might, and glory of God. Many here today suffer more than the rest of us realize. Many joining us by radio are unable to get out to be with us. Know this: Jesus Christ is the light of God shining into the darkness of our lives.

It is also good news that in Jesus Christ, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In Jesus, God draws close to us. It is easy to think of God as far away, beyond our reach, beyond our comprehension, beyond our imagination, perhaps beyond caring for us. But in Jesus, God draws close to us. In Jesus, God declares war on the alien powers and kingdoms which would claim us as their own. We do not belong to the powers of sin, death, and evil. We do not belong to the appetites of hunger, greed, and lust. We do not belong to the worship of self, family, race, or nation. Instead, we belong to God, the Father of Jesus Christ, the Lord of heaven and earth.

The reason God draws near to us in Jesus is to make us citizens in the kingdom of heaven, children in the family of the people of God. United States citizenship is a wonderful privilege, but it is secondary to this. Race, family, gender, and socio-economic standing are also secondary. What matters about our lives is

that we are citizens in the kingdom of heaven. This is why Christ has come to us and for us. God has taken the initiative to reclaim and restore us, even while we are running away as hard as we can. God's new world is beginning. In Jesus, God draws near and the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

The appropriate response to this good news of light shining in the darkness and the kingdom of heaven drawing near is to repent. Turn around. Do an about face. Stop running away from God and start coming toward God. Leave behind your trust, confidence, and reliance upon the powers of death, and turn to and trust in God's power of life. Abandon your crippling, suffocating, self-centeredness and be focused and centered upon God in Christ. Drop your failing efforts at self-righteousness, confess your sin, receive forgiveness, and be renewed. Reorient your whole life: heart, soul, mind, and strength.

If we could do this on our own, we would not be in the mess that we are in. Sin is not just an error which can be corrected, but an infectious, debilitating, mysterious condition from which we cannot extricate ourselves. Part of the human predicament is that not only do we do not want to turn back to God, but also that we have forfeited the ability to do so. To have turned away from God, to have rebelled against God, to have rejected God from the center of our lives and to have placed ourselves there instead, renders us incapable of replacing God to the center, leaves us unable to undo our mutiny, and twists and distorts us beyond our ability to repair ourselves.

To repent means more than to turn back. It means to realize that we are sinners whose sin has been forgiven, that we are rebels still loved by the one against whom we rebelled, that it was for our sin that the Son of God died, and that in him God has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. It is only because Jesus catches our attention on the cross and so captures our heart, soul, mind, and strength, stopping us and turning us around, that we can even hear his call to repent, let alone obey it. When God commands that we repent, the commandment turns us around, and God gives us our obedience.

In case this is too abstract, Jesus gives us an example, saying to Simon and Andrew, "Follow me." God draws near to us in Jesus Christ, and the way to repent, the way to turn away from all that is not God and to turn toward him, is to follow Jesus. That is why he calls us to follow. In Jesus, we see and know the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the way to God. God takes the initiative. Jesus calls us his very own, names us his disciples, and so we are. To follow him today means to believe that he is the Son of God, to learn what he teaches, and to do what he says. This involves faith and life, understanding and obedience.

To follow Jesus Christ is to believe that he is the Son of God. It is not enough to regard him as a good man, a great teacher, a moral example, or a political leader.

Jesus lived and died and lives again as the Son of God. In Jesus , God draws near to us, so Jesus reveals God to us. The Christian life begins with Christian faith.

To follow Jesus Christ is to believe that he is the Son of God and to learn what he teaches us. What he teaches us is recorded in the Bible. So to follow Jesus includes being a student of the Bible. We read it, we study it, we pray it, we hear it preached, we believe it, and we obey it. In Jesus we learn who God is, and at the same time we learn who we are. It is God who made us and to him that we belong, and for this we give God thanks. Our faith seeks understanding. This is not to say that we have to understand something before we believe it. Quite the opposite. We cannot begin to understand until we believe. But we are not simply to believe and stop there. We are to use the minds God has given us and seek to understand. We use what we learn from the Bible in our efforts to understand not only Jesus Christ, but also life, the world, and the universe.

To follow Jesus Christ is to believe that he is the Son of God, to learn what he teaches us, and to do what he says. Being Christian is a matter of both faith and life, believing and obeying. We are to trust in God and be loyal to God. We are to love God and to love neighbor. We want to do what Jesus says.

Simon Peter and Andrew his brother give a good example of obedience: when Jesus called them, “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” The same happens with James and John, the sons of Zebedee: as soon as Jesus called them, “Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.” They left their livelihood, their employment, and their family, to follow Jesus. They left good and important work undone, to take up better and more important work. It is not appropriate for us to keep Jesus waiting. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is calling us to follow him now! Do not wait until tomorrow to make up your mind. Do not wait until next year to try to follow. Do not wait until it is too late to try to obey.

Now, when Jesus says, “Follow me,” he does not call us into a life of inactivity. Instead, he calls us into relationship with God, with himself, and with each other. Jesus calls us to spread the good word about him and build up his church, the community of people faithful to him. This is what it means that he says, “I will make you fishers of men.” Part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ is to be a member of the Christian church. So, we invite people to worship God, to hear the preaching of the gospel, to receive baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and to become followers of Jesus Christ, professing faith in him as Lord and Savior, and so becoming members of the church. If you have not done this, we invite and urge you to do so.

There are many other things that can be done with human life. There are countless ways in which it can be ruined and wasted. This is the one purpose for which human life was created: following the resurrected and living Jesus Christ. In

his name, I call upon all of us today to commit ourselves to this and to recommit ourselves to this. Give your life to Jesus Christ. Dedicate your heart, soul, mind, and strength to his service. As we approach the end of this year, let us all be sure that our giving to the church honors God and his Christ. And as we consider our pledges for next year, let us all pray for the grace to pledge and to give rightly, as God wills us to, as an inseparable part of our faithful following of Jesus Christ.

In today's reading, with his first four disciples following him, Jesus went all through Galilee, teaching, preaching, and healing. His fame spread, and great crowds followed him. Today hundreds of millions of followers call him Lord. His teaching, preaching, and healing spread throughout the world. By the grace of God drawn near to us in Jesus Christ, many are called out of darkness into light, out of loneliness into community, out of uselessness into service, out of despair into joy, out of comfort into challenge, out of timidity into boldness, and out of fearfulness into courage. We are grateful to be a part of that. We want to help with, and extend throughout the world, the teaching of the word of God in the Bible, the preaching of the gospel, and healing in the name of Jesus Christ. Our giving can help make that happen.

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*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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