

# Following Jesus 24/7

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Luke 9:57-62

**Sermon Series:**  
**Calling People to Faith**

*We don't always know where Jesus is taking us, yet we follow.*

Chris and I traveled to our daughter's college field hockey game several years ago. We were navigating our way through Friday rush hour traffic in New York City when we became hopelessly lost. Initially, I did what any American male would do: I kept driving. Finally, I succumbed to Chris's urgings and stopped at a donut shop. I asked the odd assortment of people at the counter for directions to Baker Field in Manhattan. Most didn't bother to lift their heads from their Krispy Crème donuts and hot coffee. One young man with shaggy hair, huddled in the corner with his equally shaggy girlfriend, perked up: "I know Baker Field," and he described in great detail how to get there. "Turn right here, left there, go to the fourth traffic light..." He could detect my brain lock. "I'll tell you what," he said, "we're about to leave. Follow me and I'll take you myself." So, we followed his well-used car spewing blue smoke through New York City. We darted in and out of traffic, winding our way through back alleys. At one point, Chris and I looked at each other, "Do you suppose he's really taking us to Baker field?" Lo and behold, he led us straight to our destination by game time and waved goodbye.

Sometimes, following Jesus is like that. We don't always know where Jesus is taking us, yet we follow.

"Follow me," the Lost Boys sing in Peter Pan. "We're following the leader wherever he may go and we won't be home till morning. We won't be home till morning because he told us to."

"Follow me" happens to be the motto of the U.S. Army's Infantry School.

Are you following me? Do you understand what I'm saying?

Our focus today is Jesus' call: "Follow me." We've been examining various call stories in the gospels. Before we consider Jesus' words in our Scripture lesson, I invite you to turn to Jesus' original call to three fishermen in Luke 5:1-11. Peter, James and John have been fishing all night without success. Jesus finds them the following morning cleaning their nets, ready to call it quits. Jesus directs them to push out to sea and let down their nets again. Peter agrees reluctantly, "If you say so." This seemingly illogical act results in an unprecedented catch of fish. Peter feels unworthy to be in the presence of someone who exercises control over the sea. "Go away from me Lord," he exclaims, "for I am a sinful man." Peter doesn't realize his confession is actually the best

***Follow is not merely a concept in the gospels, it expresses action.***

prerequisite for service. Jesus turns this amazing catch of fish into an object lesson about fishing for people. When these three fishermen haul their boats to shore, they leave everything to follow Jesus. My inquiring mind wants to know what they did with the fish, but that's quite beside the point. What matters is that they left everything to follow Jesus.

Jesus' disciples, true to their name, follow Jesus. A disciple is, precisely, a follower. Follow is not merely a concept in the gospels, it expresses action. Following involves acting on Jesus' teachings, not merely conceptualizing them.

When I was in kindergarten, I used to play a simple game called "Follow the Leader." The teacher selected one of us to be the leader while the rest assumed the posture of followers. It was a copycat game in which whatever the leader did, everyone followed suit. Our job was to mimic the leader. If we failed to follow the leader, we were eliminated from the game. The last remaining one assumed the role as the new leader.

I asked our church preschool director if the game is still played today. "No," she sighed, "parents don't want their children to be followers anymore. They want their children to be leaders."

Jesus elaborates on what it means to "follow me" in Luke 9:57-62 with a series of three vignettes about people intending to follow Jesus. The first man is eager to follow: "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus' response is rather cryptic: "Foxes have holes

and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." In other words, this man doesn't really understand what it means to follow him. Jesus has just spoken that the Son of Man must suffer and be killed (9:22, 44). Jesus seeks recruits who are willing to count the cost. Eugene Peterson captures the sense of Jesus' words in *The Message*, "Are you ready to rough it? We're not staying in the best inns, you know."

Jesus says to the second man, "Follow me." The man in question responds, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Most Bible experts agree this man's father is not already dead or even dying. Otherwise, why would this man be on the roadside, chatting it up with an itinerant band of disciples? He would be home, holding vigil for his deceased father until the burial.

This second man offers a lame excuse. He intends to defer following Jesus until the distant future. Jesus, however, is emphatic—the time is now.

The third candidate for discipleship, like the first man, is eager to follow but, like the second man, attaches a rider to following Jesus. According to Dr. Ken Bailey, considered the foremost Mid-East Biblical scholar today, when someone asks to take leave of his or her parents, the person leaving must request permission from those who are staying. Those listening to the dialogue know, naturally, the father will refuse to let the son wander off to such a questionable enterprise. Thus, the volunteer's excuse is ready made. By shedding crocodile

***Jesus offers people nothing less than Spartan accommodations, no compassionate leave and long stretches away from home.***

tears he can loudly insist he wants to go, yet he knows his father won't permit him. This man isn't going home to plant one final kiss on his parents. He's requesting permission to submit the question of following Jesus to his father's authority.

This man believes his father's authority has a higher place than Jesus' authority. In the first century Middle East, and still today, a father's word was considered binding. Dr. Bailey recalls the reaction when he expounded this text to a class of Middle Eastern seminary students. They were horrified that Jesus claimed an authority higher than the man's father. This shock was all the more stunning since it was made by a young man in his early thirties. In those days, the only alternatives were obedience and compliance or rejection and hostility.

Many of us live in families today where a decision to follow Christ is honored. But in the first century, the decision to follow Jesus often meant leaving one's family. In Jewish families, then as now, following Jesus resulted in being disinherited. In some places in the world, the decision to follow Jesus still results in family rejection. I know of a pastor who served as a missionary in East Malaysia. He attended a small church one Sunday in which a teenage girl came forward to announce her decision to follow Christ and be baptized. This missionary noticed worn-out luggage in the sanctuary

during the service, so he asked the pastor about it. "Her father said that if she was baptized as a Christian she could never go home again. So she brought her luggage."

Jesus clarifies in these verses the importance and seriousness with which he takes this call of discipleship. Anyone who plows a field must keep his eye on what he is doing. The moment he looks back, he jeopardizes his ability to plow a straight path, which results in crooked furrows.

Jesus' candor in these verses is altogether striking. It's almost as if Jesus goes out of his way to make sure his call to discipleship is as daunting a challenge as possible. He surely couldn't be accused of duping people into following him or promising them an easy ride. Quite the contrary! Jesus offers people nothing less than Spartan accommodations, no compassionate leave and long stretches away from home.

It makes me wonder whether, in our haste to win converts in the church, we soft-peddle Jesus' call to discipleship. We headline all the benefits of following Jesus while burying in the small print Jesus' call to radical discipleship.

Some of us, like the first man in our story, glibly follow Jesus Christ without bothering to count the cost. We speak freely about the rewards of following Jesus, but conveniently ignore his discipleship demands. Or, like the second man, we offer excuses. I'll follow you when I'm older or when I get married and

***The one  
criterion of  
following  
Jesus is  
willingness.***

settle down or after I raise my family or retire. Or, like the third man, we look back over our shoulder to a way of life we are unwilling to entirely leave.

Jesus' call to discipleship must compete with a thousand other voices clamoring for our attention. Lord knows there are bills to pay, home projects to complete, kids to shuttle, laundry to clean, meals to prepare and papers to write. How can I manage one more call?

Jesus' call doesn't ordinarily require us to leave what we are doing to follow him. Most of us can follow him living in the families and occupations where God has already placed us. We don't need any change in our literal circumstances. What we need is a change of focus; to leave this life of self-absorption to serve God in selfless discipleship.

Our culture today has become increasingly non-committal. People don't want to commit to anything anymore; we want to keep our options open. We are witnessing today the tragic consequences of people trying to live in non-committed relationships. If you doubt the truth of these words, pay close attention to the message being conveyed through virtually every TV sitcom.

We know Peter, James and John's response. They are willing to follow. What about our response? It all boils down to who is willing. The one criterion of following Jesus is willingness.

Like Jesus' other parables, we're not told what each man decides in this story. I suspect

Jesus leaves the ending off these parables on purpose. We don't know how these three men answer. What matters is how we will answer.

***We don't know how these  
three men answer. What  
matters is how we will  
answer.***

