



# Going God's Way

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Matthew 4:12-22

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Peter Drucker is regarded today as the father of modern business management principles. He participated in a seminar on leadership some years ago. He stood up after yet another presentation on leadership and said, “I don’t know why people are so fixated on leadership. What we really need to think about is followership.”

Is “followership” actually a word? Yes, it’s the flip side of leadership.

Followership is not a novel concept. Aristotle said some 2500 years ago, “He who cannot be a good follower cannot be a good leader.”

Social media has redefined what it means to follow someone. Followers are also known by the designation “fans” or “friends.” Followers are people who read your posts and see your pictures. It’s all rather casual and noncommittal.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote an essay in the 1840’s titled *Followers, Not Admirers*. Admirers may be compared to social media followers. Admirers remain detached. They don’t make sacrifices. They only play it safe. In Kierkegaard’s words, followers aspire to become what they admire. They understand that what they admire makes a claim on them.

The bottom line for Kierkegaard is this: Jesus is not looking for admirers. He is seeking followers. Are you a follower of Christ or simply an admirer?

Jesus begins his public ministry in chapter four of Matthew’s gospel. He has left his hometown Nazareth for

Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. The region of Galilee is an outermost province of Israel, far away from headquarters in Jerusalem. Galilee is home to Jews and Gentiles alike. Gentiles are people who are not yet members of God's covenant family of believers. Matthew regards it as fulfilling Old Testament prophecy that Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee. As we read in verse 15, Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would begin his ministry in "the Galilee of the Gentiles." It would be comparable to saying, "America is a melting pot." Matthew interprets Jesus beginning his ministry in Galilee as foreshadowing his outreach to people outside the Hebrew fold. By the close of Matthew's gospel, Jesus directs his followers to take his message to all nations and people groups (Matthew 28:18-20).

We read in verse 17, "Jesus began to preach beside the Sea of Galilee." Matthew summarized Jesus' preaching with the words, "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near." They're the same words John the Baptist preached to prepare people for the coming Messiah.

"Repent" is a much-abused word. For some people, the word conjures up negative stereotypes of fire-and-brimstone preachers who use repentance to strike fear into people. Repent and believe. Turn or burn.

Repent literally means "to turn around." It originates from the Greek word *metanoia*, from which we derive our English word "metamorphosis." Since the kingdom of heaven has come near in Jesus, we don't want to be turned the wrong way. We must be pointed in the right direction to welcome the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus calls two sets of brothers to follow him in our story. All four are commercial fisherman who work the Sea of Galilee. He says to the first set of brothers, Simon (later given the name Peter by Jesus) and Andrew, “Come, follow me and I will send you out to fish for people” (Matthew 4:18).

It’s a bold, audacious invitation. Jesus does not tell them, “follow God” or “follow my teaching.” He tells him, “follow me.” Jesus embodies the kingdom of God. The third century church leader Origen said, “Jesus is the kingdom of God in person.”

*Follow* is a spatial term. It means to walk behind someone and go in whatever direction they go. The object of the children’s game, “Follow the Leader” is to mimic everything the leader does. In Jesus’ day, students would literally walk behind their teachers as they traveled place to place.

Jesus’ invitation, “Come and follow me” is coupled with the words, “I will send you out to fish for people.” There is two-part pattern in this verse. Come and follow. Go and fish for people.

Jesus utilizes the analogy of fishing because he’s talking to fishermen. If he was speaking to doctors, he might talk about healing people. If he was talking to auto mechanics, he might say something about fixing broken people. But because he’s speaking to fishermen, he talks about fishing for people.

Please don’t make too much of this fishing metaphor. Jesus does not mean we try to bait people or somehow hook

them into believing. If there is any catching to be done, it is catching people with God's love and mercy.

Jesus' invitation to follow and fish for people is accompanied by Matthew's comment in verse 20, "At once, they left their nets and followed him." Matthew gives us only the barest essentials. Did they have time to think it over? Did they talk about it with Jesus before they followed him? We'll never know. "At once" communicates urgency. If the kingdom of heaven has come near, there's no time to lose.

Jesus then calls a second set of brothers, James and John in verses 21-22. There are three things common to both call stories. First, Jesus invites both sets of brothers to follow him. Second, there is no delay in their response. James and John follow Jesus immediately (Matthew 4:22). Third, they leave some things behind, namely their occupation of fishing and their dad in the boat. I've known cults who have tried to manipulate this story to justify abandoning family responsibilities. Matthew is not lobbying for people to shirk family responsibilities. His point is that the kingdom of heaven has primacy over temporal concerns.

That's the story, as I see it. So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have three applications to offer you this morning.

First application: Turn in God's direction. Since the kingdom of heaven has come near, we want to be in the best possible position to receive it. We want to be turned toward God's coming kingdom, not away from it.

You may be going the wrong way right now. You're headed in the wrong direction. You've taken a detour, the wrong fork in the road. We need to turn in order to receive what God has to give us.

Maybe you are not headed in the wrong direction, but are going sideways right now. You are not headed toward God or away from God, but you are stuck. You are in a rut. You are not making any spiritual progress at the moment. You also need to turn and make a midcourse correction.

This decision to turn toward God may require you to leave some things behind. Maybe you've been carrying around old hurts or holding onto deep resentments. Perhaps you are carrying around excess baggage of guilt and shame. Let it go. Jesus invites us to lay our burdens down.

Second application: Follow after Jesus. He left footprints for those who come after him. Aspire to walk, as apprentices of Jesus in close proximity to him.

We are focusing on Matthew's gospel this fall. We will learn in practical ways what it means to follow Jesus. Join us in reading and reflecting on a different story each day in Matthew's gospel through our daily devotional. Our church staff supplements these readings with Daily Word and Prayer available at noon or later each Monday through Friday. Every Tuesday I offer a five-minute reflection on a daily reading from Matthew's gospel on my iPhone from my backyard.

Our goal is not merely to read about Jesus. Our objective is to study his teaching and then put it into practice. Read and apply.

We urge you to join a class or Bible study to assist in this learning process. You do not need to know anything to join a Sunday morning Learning Community or Bible Study. We all start in the same place—at the beginning! We begin two Bible studies for men and two for women this week. Monday Night Men and Monday Night Women kick off tomorrow night. If you are a morning person, there a Bible study for women on Tuesday mornings and another for men on Friday mornings. Reading the Word with fellow believers can become in your life a dynamic catalyst for spiritual growth.

Third application: Join Jesus in his work. Turn in God's direction, follow after Jesus and join him in his work. Let me remind you that Jesus' invitation, "Come and follow me" is matched with the words, "I send you out to fish for people."

We want you to become more invitational about inviting people during this season of COVID-19. What are we now—month seven of this pandemic? Everyone is trying to cope with life's uncertainty and fragility. People are more receptive to engaging in spiritual conversation right now, if we are willing to initiate with them.

Seventy percent of people would consider coming to church if someone invited them. The percentage of people willing to engage with our church is even higher when it comes to attending online. People who might never set foot in our building would consider joining us online. It takes you and me inviting them.

Invite them to join you for a Sunday morning online service. Invite them to an outdoor Sunday evening service.

We made the decision earlier this week to continue worshiping outdoors until Halloween, so bundle up and join us under the tents.

Dr. Tremper Longman will join us two successive Wednesday evenings beginning September 30 for a Webinar on *The Bible and the Ballot: Using the Bible in Political Decisions*. Tremper is a college classmate of Chris and me. He's also a first-rate scholar with considerable practical insight on how to apply the Bible to our current social climate. He will join us the night after the first presidential debate. Our aim is to have civil discourse on issues that deeply divide our country right now: issues of immigration, poverty and race, to name a few.

Turn in God's direction, follow after Jesus and join him in his work.