

What Does Jesus Mean When He Says, “Follow Me”? A Study of Matthew 4:18-22

Characteristic of Completeness: Discipleship

Big Idea: You’ve got to drop your net to take up your cross.

Related Scriptures: Matthew 8:19-22; 10:37-39; 16:24; 19:27-29; 28:19-20;
Luke 5:27-28; 22:54; John 1:29-42; 21:1-22

Introduction:

- A. I suspect that most of us in this room would agree that following Jesus is a good thing. You probably try to follow the Lord. If you have children, you’d probably like them to follow the Lord. If you’re married, you’d probably like your spouse to follow the Lord.

But what exactly does it mean to follow Him? What does Jesus mean when He says, “Follow Me”? What exactly does it involve?

- B. That’s the question I’d like to address this morning. The text we’re studying helps us. It’s Matthew 4:18-22. It describes a scene in which Jesus is calling some men to follow Him. It’s inspirational. And bothersome.

Let me read it for you. Matthew ► 4:18-22:

^{NAU} Matthew 4:18 Now as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. ► 19 And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ► 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. ► 21 Going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the *son* of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them. ► 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

That’s ► our text. And here’s the bothersome part. It sounds like this is first time these guys have laid eyes on Jesus, and the first two words they hear from His mouth are “Follow Me,” and immediately—*immediately*—they drop everything and follow.

You’ve got to be kiddin’ me.

Right off, I’m afraid this is going to be one of those unbelievable, unrealistic, unreachable stories of faith that is discouragingly beyond me. In my circle of friends, I don’t know anybody who’s done anything close to what these men did. Who on earth has followed as suddenly and unreservedly and radically as these guys? Not me.

So go ahead and give me the big fat “F” on following. Let’s get this guilt trip over with.

Not so fast.

From this text, I want to show you ► four things that are true about following the Lord. There are four things we need to know about what to means to follow. And one of the things pokes a hole in the bothersome part. My presumption that this is unbelievable, unrealistic, and unreachable is, in fact, unfounded.

I. (“Follow Me” is a command to become a disciple.)

A. If ► you were to take your Bible and track down everywhere the original word for “follow” is used in the New Testament, you would find that there are degrees of following. Not all following is the same. Let me show you two different kinds of following.

1. First, there is a casual kind of following. This casual following simply involves accompanying someone somewhere. It’s tagging along.

When we’re done this morning, you’re probably going to do some casual following. You’re going to follow some people out the door. You’re going to follow some cars out of the parking lot. You’re going to follow the customer in front of you at Taco Bell.

Casual following involves close physical proximity but low relational commitment. We see casual following, for example, in ► Matthew 4:25, where crowds followed Jesus. It says,

^{NAU} Matthew 4:25 Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and *the* Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and *from* beyond the Jordan.

The crowds are indeed accompanying Jesus, but there is no commitment or discipleship implied here. It’s casual following.

2. A ► second kind of following is committed following. Committed following may or may not involve close physical proximity, but it always involves high relational commitment. It is to follow the direction or teaching or example of another person who serves as an authority or mentor or model. To be a committed follower is to be a disciple.

This kind of committed following is what Jesus is calling for in our text when He ► says, “Follow Me.” He’s not just saying, “Tag along.” He’s saying, “Obey Me,” “Learn from Me,” “Try to be like Me,” “Be My disciple.”

There are several clues that tell us, when Jesus says “Follow Me,” it’s a command to become His disciple, and we get a glimpse of what it involves.

- a. In ► Verse 19, the call to become “fishers of men” confirms that this is not just casual following, it’s committed following.¹ Jesus has an assignment for them. And He’s going to equip them for the job: “*I will make you fishers of men.*”

Later on, Jesus clarifies the job description for a fisher of men. In ► Matthew 28:19, He says,

^{NAU} Matthew 28:19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . .”

So disciples make disciples. Followers make followers. Fishers make fishers. There’s a commitment to cast the good news of Christ by our ways and our words. There’s a commitment to bring people in to a saving and growing knowledge of Jesus Christ.

If I’m not fishing, I’m not following. Not in the way Jesus commands.

- b. If we zoom out a little, we also see that Jesus is not trying to draw a crowd; He’s developing a core. He’s mobilizing the Twelve Disciples, the founding fishers of men. Peter, Andrew, James, and John are four of the twelve recruited as the first fishers. When ► Verse 20 says these guys followed, they did so as disciples.
- c. The people who produce biblical Greek dictionaries recognize this. Look up the Greek word for “followed” and you’ll find two kinds of following are possible: casual and committed.² But the use of the word “followed” in our text is listed as an example under the “committed” definition. It is “to join one as a disciple.”³
- d. So, ► the first thing to know is that “Follow Me” is a command to be a disciple. And our ► Characteristic of Completeness for the week is Discipleship.

- B. I want to be quick to point out that the command to follow is not the same as the command to believe. They are related, but distinct. By His death and resurrection for our sins, Christ alone promises eternal life to all who will simply believe Him for it. The promise of eternal life is not to all who *follow* Him for it, but to all who simply *believe* Him for it.

¹ The call to become “fishers of men” may be an allusion to Jeremiah 16:16.

² They don’t use the terms “casual” or “committed.” Those are my descriptors.

³ Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. “ἀκολουθέω” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977).

Having believed, we are adopted into God's forever family. And once we're family, *then* the Lord expects us to follow the family rules. Jesus commands believers to follow, but we don't always obey. Like adopted children, our disobedience can jeopardize our own well-being and can prompt our Father's discipline, but our adoption can never be undone.

When Jesus says, "Follow Me," it's not a command to become a believer; it's a command to become a disciple. That's the first thing to know.

- II. (The decision to follow is a process.) The ► second thing to know is less obvious.
- A. In our text, the decision to follow may appear to come out of the blue, from a single contact with Jesus. The word "immediately" jumps out. "Immediately," they followed Him. Wow.

But hold on a minute. When we piece together the complete historical sequence of events from elsewhere in the Bible, we find that Andrew and John and Peter had encountered Jesus before. They've known Jesus for a while. They have a history with Him.

1. You see, the ► events recorded in John 1:29-42 come before the call of Jesus in Matthew 4. All ► the stuff in John 1 happened before. Let me unpack the story.

Two men in particular had followed the preaching of John the Baptist. The two men had heard John say, "I am not the Messiah."⁴ The two men may have been there when John baptized Jesus and the voice of the Father came down from heaven and said, "This is My Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."⁵ All this happened before.

And now, the two men are with John the Baptist.⁶ Just the day before, John had confirmed that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And now Jesus approaches. And as Jesus approaches, John says to the two men, as if to introduce them personally: "Behold, the Lamb of God." All this happened before.

At that point, the two men follow Jesus.⁷ Same word: "follow."⁸ Jesus bids them, "Come."⁹ The two men who follow Jesus have names: Andrew and

⁴ John 1:20.

⁵ Matthew 3:13-17.

⁶ John 1:29-36 for this paragraph.

⁷ John 1:37.

⁸ ἀκολουθέω

⁹ John 1:39.

John.¹⁰ They are the very same men in our text in Matthew 4, one with a net, the other in a boat. All this happened before.

After spending some time with Jesus, Andrew cannot contain himself.¹¹ He runs to his brother and shouts, “We have found the Messiah!” And Andrew brings his brother to Jesus. Andrew’s brother has a name: It’s Simon. But Jesus changes it to Peter. Peter is the very same guy in our text in Matthew 4. All this happened before.

2. You ask, ► “How long before?” And some scholars say, “About a year.”¹² So, when Jesus says, “Follow Me” in Matthew 4, this is far from the first time these guys have laid eyes on Jesus. They’ve known Him for a year. They know who He is.

And this isn’t even the first time they’ve been called to follow. In fact, the events in John 1 are considered the first call of disciples. The events of Matthew 4 represent the second call a year later.

3. Between the first and second call, Jesus did a number of things Andrew, John, and Peter may have observed first hand, or at least heard about.
 - a. Jesus miraculously turned water into wine at the wedding of Cana (John 2:1-12).
 - b. Jesus got angry and cleansed the temple of charlatans (John 2:13-22).
 - c. Jesus reached out to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42).
 - d. And Jesus miraculously healed a nobleman’s son (John 4:43-54).
4. In light of all this, the decision to follow at the second call may be viewed as a recommitment, at least for Andrew, Peter, and John.¹³ In fact, their earlier commitment may explain their haste in following Him now.¹⁴

- B. What’s more, even after the decision to follow in our text, the disciples were not consistent. They needed a periodic recommitment. That is to say, they were not so different than you and me. They were human.

¹⁰ Andrew is named (John 1:40); John is inferred to be the unnamed one giving the historical account. See Johnston M. Cheney and Stanley Ellisen, *Jesus Christ: The Greatest Life Ever Lived*, (Eugene, OR: Paradise Publishing, 1999), 43.

¹¹ John 1:39-42 for this paragraph.

¹² Cheney and Ellisen, 26, 48.

¹³ D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1985), 119.

¹⁴ Ibid.

1. You may recall when Jesus is arrested just before His crucifixion, Peter regresses. Following faints. He abandons Jesus. Luke ► 22:54 tells us:

^{NAU} Luke 22:54 Having arrested Him [Jesus], they led Him *away* and brought Him to the house of the high priest; but Peter was following at a distance.

Peter relapses to ► a different kind of following—one that is fearful, self-protective, observing but not taking a stand, not wanting to be too closely associated with Jesus. We can be different followers at different times.

2. Even ► after the resurrection, Peter returns once more to fishing for fish, and Jesus has to call him again and again to follow, to fish for men.¹⁵

Don't get me wrong. I still think Peter and the Twelve are heroes. But they are human heroes, not superhuman. And their model of following points to ► the second thing we need to know: The decision to follow is a process. Every once in a while we regress, and we have to re-up. We have to recommit. We have to redirect. We have to keep deciding to follow again and again. It's not once and done.

- III. And that leads us to ► the third thing we need to know about following. To ► follow, we must leave something. To go after Jesus, we must let go of something. There is a personal cost. To be disciples, we must let go of whatever inhibits or prohibits a non-negotiated commitment to follow Jesus.¹⁶

Like what? What are some things we might need to leave? Let's look again at our text for some examples.

- A. Verse ► 20 explains what Peter and Andrew left. It says,

^{NAU} Matthew 4:20 Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

They had to leave their ► nets before they could follow.

1. The structure of this sentence in Greek makes the order emphatic. It could be translated this way: Having left their nets, they followed Him.
2. The word, ► “left” comes from a Greek word that means to let go of or leave behind or abandon something.¹⁷

¹⁵ John 21:1-22. Verse 19: “Follow Me!” Verse 22: “You follow Me!”

¹⁶ Joseph Stowell, “Followership,” *Preaching Today*, Tape 178.

¹⁷ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. “ἀφίημι,” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

3. What does letting go of their nets represent? What are they leaving in order to follow? Did they just up and quit their jobs and abandon their families and become jobless, homeless street preachers?

Probably not. A little later, we find Peter at home with his family.¹⁸ Still later, we find the disciples fishing for fish again.¹⁹ And much of Jesus' early ministry was within walking distance of the disciples' homes. Taken together, these bits of circumstantial evidence point to disciples who are perhaps a little more normal than we tend to think. A little more real, a little less rarefied. Sometimes fishing for fish; sometimes fishing for men. Sometimes on the road; sometimes at home. Perhaps their family fishing enterprise was large enough to help support the early ministry of Jesus and His disciples.²⁰

But it's safe to say there was significant sacrifice. Letting go of their nets cost them something.

In letting go of their nets, they were letting go of their agenda. Letting go of some income. Letting go of some financial security. Perhaps even letting go of their identity and ego inasmuch as a man often defines himself by his success at work.

- B. And consider what James and John left. Verse ► 22 says,

^{NAU} Matthew 4:22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

They left ► their boat. Boats hold people. And the parallel account in Mark 1:20 indicates that they had hired servants. The implication is that they left behind some people who had certain expectations of them, not the least of whom was ► their father.

In leaving their boat and their father, they were leaving behind the expectations others had for them. Leaving conformity to social norms. Leaving the realm of pleasing people.

We can only imagine how the conversation went.

The father is flabbergasted: "James, John, where are you going?"

¹⁸ Matthew 8:14.

¹⁹ Luke 5:1-11. According to Cheney and Ellisen, the miraculous catch of Luke 5 comes after second call of the disciples, 48.

²⁰ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 5, s.v. "Zebedee," by L.M. Petersen (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, 1976), 1038.

“Well Dad, we’re going to follow Jesus.”

“You’re going to what? I busted my tail to build this fishing business, all for you—all so that I could hand it over to you. And this is the thanks I get? You’re going to follow Jesus?”

- C. Jesus Himself tells us that, in order to follow Him, we must leave something. In ► Matthew 16:24, Jesus says,

^{NAU} Matthew 16:24 . . . “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.”

Notice the net a disciple must drop in order to follow: ► himself.

You must deny yourself. Override your default. Refuse your selfish impulses. Let go of your agenda. Your plans. Your ambitions. Only then can you follow. Only then can you take up your cross.

Taking up your cross is taking up the call and cause of Christ. It’s the cross of self-denial in service to others. The cross of loving sacrifice. The cross of being misunderstood and scorned and scourged for living out and speaking out the message of grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

The ► big idea is this: You’ve got to drop your net to take up your cross.²¹

- D. What is your net? What is the Lord calling you to leave in order to follow Him?

Remember, following is a process. So I think it’s a mistake to think of this as one momentous move at one moment in time that changes everything. Certainly it can include such big moments, but for me and everybody else I know, the big moments are few in number. More commonly it’s about the million little mundane moments peppered throughout every day, every hour—moments in which Jesus calls us to drop the net. And we either drop or disregard.

And the net is anything that would keep us from doing what the Lord calls us to do in that moment. In the excuse, “Well, I would follow, but . . .” the net is the “but.” The net is whatever fills in the blank. I would follow, *but* I’m too busy. I would follow, *but* I’m afraid of what people will think. I would follow, *but* I don’t know what to say.

Let me illustrate. Ten days ago, on a Wednesday morning, at about 6:15AM, in my office at home, I was preparing my rough draft outline for this sermon. More specifically, I was preparing to present the outline for a Teaching Team meeting at 9:30AM that morning. And I’m feeling some pressure because I’ve got this meeting,

²¹ I’m borrowing and adapting a line from Stowell: “drop their nets and pick up their crosses” (Joseph Stowell, “Followership,” *Preaching Today*, Tape 178.)

and more meetings after that, and homework for my doctoral class, and a wedding, and the men's retreat coming up, and I've got to water the new plants I put out in the front yard or they might die because I haven't put in the irrigation system yet, and I've got income taxes to do for which I filed an extension and would again if I could, but I can't, and morning is prime time productivity for me, that's when I can really get things done, and that Wednesday morning at 6:15AM, I'm on a roll.

But Cathy and I have a routine. At about 6:15AM, I bring her some coffee and we spend a little time together chatting about how we're feeling and what the day holds and sometimes we pray. It's one of the few times during the day we have some uninterrupted time together.

But on this day, I'm hoping to get out of it. Yes, I deliver the obligatory coffee. And upon delivery, Cathy asks, "How are you doing?" And I see my opening, and I say, "Well, I'm really on a roll." And I don't go around and sit in the bed beside her like I usually do. I linger at the foot of the bed, glancing at the door, silently waiting for permission.

And she says, "You're on a roll a lot." Permission denied. I'm not always the sharpest knife in the drawer, but in that moment, I know the right thing to do. God's voice was not audible, but it could not have been clearer: "Drop it. Drop your net. Drop it."

I glance at the net. In that moment, my net is my home office right across the hall where the light is on and the computer is on and the cursor is blinking, counting, waiting for me to resume all my work. But in that moment, that is not my most important work. That is not what the Lord is calling me to do. He's calling me to drop the net, to let it go and follow.

Sometimes I don't, but, in that moment, I do.

In the million mundane moments of life, God calls us to take up our cross, to be like Him, to set aside our agenda, to lovingly sacrifice. In order to follow, you've got to leave something. You've got to drop your net to take up your cross.

IV. The ► fourth thing to know about following is the answer to a vital question: Is it worth it? Is it worth it to drop your net and take up your cross? What will there be for you who follow?

A. In ► Matthew 19:27, Peter himself poses the question to Jesus:

^{NAU} Matthew 19:27 . . . "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?"

My sanctimonious side says, "What a selfish question." My other side says, "That's exactly what I was wondering."

B. Jesus gives a remarkable answer.

1. First, Jesus gives an answer specific to the Twelve Disciples. In ► Matthew 19:28, He says,

^{NAU} Matthew 19:28 . . . “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, ► in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Jesus is saying that Peter and the founding fishers of men will rule with Him in the “regeneration,” the life to come. They will be honored with leadership responsibilities. Seems only right. We owe our lives to them.

We were caught because they dropped their nets. Who will be caught because you dropped yours?

2. There will be rewards for all other followers, too. Jesus says all of us who follow in this life will be rewarded in the next. In ► Verse 29, He says,

^{NAU} Matthew 19:29 “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, ► will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.”²²

The idea is ► simple: Following is worth it. That’s the last thing to know. Following is worth it.

- C. My friend, Ed, dropped his net recently. He got a call about his dad. His dad went into the hospital for a routine heart procedure and more serious problems turned up. They wouldn’t let him leave the hospital and scheduled him for an emergency quadruple bypass.

Ed’s a busy man. But he got the call and dropped the net. He jumped in his car and drove four hours to La Quinta, California. But that wasn’t the hardest net Ed had to drop.

You see, Ed’s dad was not a believer in Jesus. And so, naturally, Ed was concerned for his father’s eternal destiny. Behind the wheel, Ed prayed and agonized over what he

²² This is not to say that we receive eternal life by leaving these things. To “inherit” here means something like, “to experience more richly.” Dillow explains it this way: “A difficulty now arises: since eternal life is usually equated with regeneration, how can it be obtained by abandoning father, mother, home, children, and other things listed? The answer is . . . that every time eternal life is presented in Scripture as something to be obtained by a work, it is always a future acquisition. It becomes synonymous in these contexts with a richer experience of that life given freely at regeneration” (Joseph Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 2d ed., (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing, 1993), 66-67.)

might say to his father about Jesus when he got to the hospital. I can only imagine what he was thinking. How should I start? What should I say? Will he think I'm a fool? Will he be offended? And if he's offended, will I just be making a bad situation worse for him?

Ed is now bedside. He father is perfectly lucid and the two of them are just chewing the fat. And they run out of fat. And Ed's dad says, "Well, what are we going to talk about now?"

And I imagine a part of Ed wants to find more fat. Or go to the bathroom. He's nervous. He's clinging to the net of personal safety, self protection, avoidance of failure, "don't rock the boat."

But he gets the call. "Drop it. Drop the net and take up your cross. I will make you a fisher of men."

So Ed follows. He tells his dad about the love of Jesus Christ. About how Jesus died and rose again to be our Savior from sin. About how Jesus promises eternal life to all who will simply believe Him for it.

And, at first, Ed's dad says what many people say: "That's too easy." But then, he believes. He believes in Jesus for eternal life.

You've got to drop your net to take up your cross.

Ed's dad is saved because Ed dropped his net.

Who will be saved because you dropped yours?