

FOLLOWING FAITH

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A “following sea” is generally a good thing for a sailor—like a tailwind for a pilot; it means *the force is with you*, moving you in the direction you want to go. Instead of fighting the current or a headwind, you’re cruising, carried along by the water or the breeze.

In this Christian life we’ve embraced, we need a following faith. By that I mean, we need a faith that carries us along in the right direction. A faith that is continually *reaching* for Christ is a faith that will keep you *close* to Him.

E. Stanley Jones was a medical missionary to the people of India. After suffering a massive stroke in his late eighties, he painstakingly dictated his final book, “The Divine Yes,” in which he said: “I need no other props to hold up my faith, for my faith holds me. I do not possess my faith; my faith possesses me.” That’s a following faith.

Consider Luke’s account of three real people encountered by Jesus, three men who expressed their intention to follow Him:

(Luke 9: 57-62)

As they were walking along, someone said to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

But Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.”

He said to another person, “Come, follow me.”

The man agreed, but he said, “Lord, first let me return home and bury my father.”

But Jesus told him, “Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead! Your duty is to go and preach about the Kingdom of God.”

Another said, “Yes, Lord, I will follow you, but first let me say good-bye to my family.”

But Jesus told him, “Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.”

What is the real value of discipleship to Christ?

What does it even mean: Disciple?

A learner. A follower. **But more...** devoted. Committed. Continually.

For instance, the three guys that Luke wrote about had a desire to follow Jesus.

The first guy signed up without being called.

The second just couldn't seem to get free of his religious traditions.

The third man offered to follow the Lord, but attached his own pre-conditions.

All three of them missed the point about following with committed devotion, and Luke doesn't tell us whether any of them ever came around—as far as we know, they are never heard of again. I think we can assume that the silence speaks clearly of their failure to follow, in spite of their desire and intent.

Let's look at each interaction:

Rash Commitments

The first man seemed to pledge himself without even thinking about what it would cost him. Then, when Jesus laid out what the cost might be, he fell silent.

Do you know people who have made rash commitments?

Too often the church can be guilty of encouraging people to simply pray the prayer and "sign on the line," and then leave them stranded when it comes to follow-up and support. Benign neglect does not build disciples.

Do we need to confess our part in this? We need to make sure that in our church we take the responsibility of introducing people to Christ seriously, including their continuing support and encouragement.

But there's a deeper theme here: perhaps rash commitments are a little closer to home for us—have we made them ourselves? Have we boasted great intent, but offered little to no follow-through on our promises?

"It is better to say nothing than to make a promise and not keep it" (Ecclesiastes 5:5).

Is your faith too easily shaken by life's trials? Jesus described some people who put their trust in Him as "rocky soil" that retains no moisture.

"The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall

away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word" (Matthew 13:20-21).

Developing "deep roots" requires deep soaking. Occasional sprinkles, even frequent sprinkling, won't do, because the moisture evaporates before it gets deep, so the roots stay on the surface. Do you make time to soak yourself *deeply* in the Word and Spirit of Christ?

Do you feel as though there isn't a solid foundation to your faith? That's a precarious condition. Jesus addressed this with a story:

"So why do you keep calling me 'Lord, Lord!' when you don't do what I say? I will show you what it's like when someone comes to me, listens to my teaching, and then follows it. It is like a person building a house who digs deep and lays the foundation on solid rock. When the floodwaters rise and break against that house, it stands firm because it is well built. But anyone who hears and doesn't obey is like a person who builds a house without a foundation. When the floods sweep down against that house, it will collapse into a heap of ruins" (Luke 6:46-49).

If your foundation feels unstable, then it's time to dig deeper until you've found a solid faith foundation to build on.

Religious Confusion

The second man who offered to follow Jesus in the story, had some religious notions that confused him and thwarted his good intention.

Do you need to fix the problem of burdensome religious traditions? Are you constrained by a sense of obligation to religious rules? Do there seem to be a series of high hurdles between you and the call of God for your life that prevent you from getting started?

Are there limits in your mind of what Jesus can and cannot do with you? Have you forgotten that He is the Sovereign of the entire universe? That His grace is sufficient for the least of us?

Are you so preoccupied with your own destiny—whether your impending death or simply how to live the rest of your life—that you can't take Jesus seriously until you have things in better order?

Do you need to break out of a pattern of living in the past and revisiting old graves—those mental tombs you've erected to mark the sorrows and losses you've encountered along life's way—and focus instead on the path that lies ahead of you, the one Jesus wants you to follow?

Do you need to break away from the expectations that friends or family put on you—assumptions that you will be a certain person, or go through certain rituals, simply because “that’s the way things are done around here”?

Social pressures and religious traditions can be persuasive, and it’s easier to say “Yes” than to mount a resistance, unless the power of the Word and Spirit of Truth are at work in you.

So, let’s learn the truth (it’s in the Scriptures), so we can follow Christ freely.

Raising Conditions

The third man in our story was willing to follow Jesus, too, as long as it could be on his own terms. You may notice in the passage a recurring phrase: “me first.” No one can properly follow the Lord with a “me first” mindset. Either Jesus Christ is Lord of all, or He’s not Lord at all.

Have you let your values get out-of-line completely? Have you forgotten the necessary hierarchy—God above, us below? He’s God, I am not (and *you* are not, either).

Have you made your faith about the pursuit of your own agenda, about working your way through your own emotional or physical wishlists? If so, you’ve turned God into *your* servant, instead of becoming His.

Have you made your role at church about what you can get out of it for yourself, instead of what you can contribute out of the life that Jesus has given you?

Are you trying to convince yourself and others that you’re really serious about God, when the truth is that you’re still trying to dictate terms to Him? Do you really want to play that game? Are you really so sure that you’re going to come out any way other than completely and utterly wrong?

There’s a temptation to put a whole load of “yeah...buts” into such a conversation about following Christ. It’s tempting to say that the context of first-century discipleship was so different that following Jesus today just cannot be the same.

It’s tempting to conclude that, if we follow Jesus, He will respect our present commitments and current state of affairs. It’s tempting to say that when God calls us—nice people, comfortable as we are—certain things will remain in place.

It’s tempting, but foolish—and unreliable.

Jesus doesn't equivocate. His invitation—His command—is straightforward: "Follow me." No excuses, no quibbling, no delays—just "yes" or "no." The offer and the answer are still (and always will be) the same.

Forget the reasons why you can't.

Forget the situations that seem to need fixing first.

Forget the whimsical offer that you hope you can retract later if things don't work out as you expect. It's meaningless.

Jesus says, "Follow me"—take to the road with me, travel with me, trust me, rely on me.

Why? Because that's where you'll find life—the abundant, full, vibrant, dangerous, seemingly unwise type of life that only God can deliver.

Jesus said, *"I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly"* (John 10:10).

When the Lord calls, if you believe He is the Lord, the only appropriate answer is "Yes."

So let's forget our conditional offers.

Instead, let's listen for God's voice calling us. Wherever He leads, let's follow Him. And let's do it with all our heart. With all our mind. With all our might.

That's following faith.