



Chris Woodham
Co-Senior Pastor
PO Box 196
Waiuku 1852
PH: (09) 235 7341
MOB: (021) 187 1928
Email: waiukuag@wag.org.nz
Web: www.wag.org.nz

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Introduction

We've been looking at what it means to "follow Jesus".

So far we've looked at the way Jesus approaches us and calls us – every single one of us – today we're going to look at the response that these first followers of Jesus made to this approach.

Scripture

NIV Matthew 19:27 *Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"*

NIV Mark 10:28 *Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!"*

NIV Luke 5:11 *So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.*

NIV Luke 5:28 *and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.*

We have been called by Jesus, which is the most amazing thing, but unless we respond to Him who has called us, our lives will be no different.

Imagine a winning Lotto ticket. Every so often there are stories in the news about someone who has won the jackpot but has not yet claimed the prize.

That ticket is significant, it's incredibly valuable, if redeemed it will cause the recipient's life to change, but if it's never redeemed then it is rendered worthless.

It isn't worthless, but unless it is redeemed, all it is, is a scrap of paper.

Unless we respond to the call of Jesus our lives will not change. The call of Jesus is worth so much more than a winning Lotto ticket and is far more significant because it's not good fortune but God's love for us and grace which gives the call.

But unless we respond to the call of Jesus then it's just an unanswered invitation; a scrap of paper with an open R.S.V.P date that can be redeemed at any time, but sits there, unused.

The thing is, though, responding to the call of Jesus requires something of us.

Jesus called these fishermen and the tax collector and they left *everything* to follow Him.

Most often, the call of Jesus on our lives does not require us to leave our family, friends or job, but it does require us to leave behind *our* way of doing life.

What these first followers and imitators of Jesus left behind was more significant than family, friends and jobs – it was everything about their lives. They left behind a way of life, a way of thinking, a pattern of behaviour. Everything in their lives changed.

A Way of Life

Following and imitating Jesus isn't something we can add to our lives; it is a completely different way of doing life.

NIV Exodus 33:13a *If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you.*

NIV Psalm 25:4 *Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths;*

NIV Psalm 119:66 *Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands.*

The Hebrew word translated as “ways” here is the word דֶּרֶךְ (derek). It is most commonly used of a ‘road’, ‘path’, or ‘journey’ but can also be translated as ‘conduct’ or ‘manner.’

Following Jesus means imitating Him, doing the things He did. It means walking the path trodden by our rabbi, joining Him on the journey, letting His conduct become our own.

These things do not necessarily come naturally; we've grown up doing things a certain way, we've been instructed in the ways of our parents, or in the ways of the world, or have embraced the ways of our friends. Even if we've grown up in a Christian home having been taught the ways of Jesus, it is still a conscious effort to live according to them.

This is why the Psalmist repeats over and over this request that God will teach him His ways, instruct him in God's paths and conduct.

NIV Romans 12:2a *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

Following Jesus means learning to *be* like Jesus. To do this we need to be *transformed* because our natural inclinations are often the exact opposite of Jesus' nature!

We often talk about being "born again" to explain what happens when we respond to the call of Jesus, accept His forgiveness and enter into a relationship with Him. However, all of our experiences and perceptions are still with us.

Transformation is a process, it is exchanging our way of doing life for God's.

NIV Luke 13:24 *"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.*

The New Testament uses words like "effort", "labour" and "strive" to encourage us in our Christian walk.

With so many self-help programs and feel good groups around it's tempting to view our Christian walk as something that is there for our pleasure and enjoyment; something to help us with our confidence or our security or a means by which we can access heaven's blessing.

Following Jesus is our response to the love and acceptance that Jesus shows to us, it's about imitating Him and about continuing His mission of sharing the Good News that Jesus came to restore our relationship with God and through Him we can be made holy and righteous to fellowship with God. Following Jesus is about proclaiming and living under the rule of God's Kingdom in our situations and to those around us.

Being called by Jesus is the source of our security and comfort. The call of Jesus tells us that He accepts us and believes that if we rely on Him we *can* imitate Him and do the things that He did. Hearing that call "follow me" is the thing we can fall back on when things are tough because Jesus would not have called us if He didn't think we could do it – and He *has* called every single one of us.

Responding to that call, actually *following* Jesus takes effort and persistence. It is a decision we must constantly make; "Today I'm going to follow Jesus."

Imitating Jesus

We've been talking for nearly a month now about this aspect of discipleship that means Jesus calls us and expects us to imitate Him.

Following Jesus means imitating Him.

NIV Ephesians 5:1 *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.³ But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.⁴ Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.*

NIV 3 John 1:11 *Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.*

So how *do* we imitate Jesus?

Very simply, it is a matter of doing the things that Jesus did. A few years ago there was a popular phrase: "What would Jesus do?" It was primarily used to measure a response or reaction to a situation. For example: we get offended by something someone says or does and ask ourselves 'what would Jesus do if someone offended Him?' – this can be used to help us respond in a Godly way to situations we may face.

However, following Jesus isn't simply a matter of reacting appropriately to situations that happen to us. Following Jesus means *acting* and creating situations where we have the opportunity to do what Jesus did.

Think about this: we often read the Bible as a list of "do-not's." It's easy to measure our righteousness in this light; 'Well, I haven't killed anyone today, haven't coveted my neighbours 42" Plasma Screen TV, I haven't worshipped any idols..."

The problem with this view is that God's Word makes it clear we are to be active in our faith. Following Jesus can never be a passive thing where we simply strive to live by a certain moral code.

Our primary mission from Jesus, the one who created this thing called The Church, is to "*go*". Unless our faith is an active thing, unless it is a verb then it's no faith at all.

NIV James 2:14 *What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do...*

Following Jesus is not simply a matter of saying "I didn't commit murder today", but a matter of asking ourselves "did I save a life today?"

NIV Matthew 7:12 *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.*

Loving one another isn't a matter of not hating each other. To love requires action, it takes initiative, it costs us something, it can be inconvenient.

I'd like to pose this question: If simply trying not to dislike each other is not actually fulfilling the command to "Love one another", then isn't that, in actual fact, disobedience to God's command?

If our lives are not characterised by an active *doing* then we need to ask ourselves, 'how closely are we really following Jesus?'

Are we truly "covered in the dust of our rabbi" or have we stopped at a wayside and had some of that dust washed off?

Following Jesus means exchanging our way of life for Jesus' way of life. More than simply trying not to do the things that, perhaps, come naturally to us, it is a matter of *doing* the things of Jesus.

That's a Nice Idea, But...

Here's the clincher: we all know we need to be *doing* these things, but the reality is many of us have tried it and failed or have struggled to juggle work, family, friends, church and everything else and have decided that it's a nice idea for some people, but here in the real world there's just no way.

"Peter, I wouldn't have called you if I didn't believe in you, if I didn't believe that you could do the things I do, if I didn't believe you could walk on water."

"Peter, I have called you, I believe in you, I think you're good enough, I think you've made the cut, I think you're the best of the best of the best."

"Peter, I believe in you and I have given you my commands, why do you doubt?"

Jesus has called you – every single one of you. That call means He has put His faith in you. That call means that despite all the things we see in our lives that we know are wrong, and all the weaknesses and failings in our lives, we have God's Word that He believes in us.

That means that even though we see all the obstacles and difficulties, the things that make it hard to put following Jesus into practice, Jesus called us to follow Him, believes that we can do it so there *must be* a way ahead!

There's no way we can truly follow Jesus in our own strength and within the limitations of our own abilities, but the thing is, Jesus has promised us His Holy Spirit in whose strength we need to learn to follow Jesus.

The Apostle Paul writes:

NIV 1 Corinthians 3:3 *You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?*

I love that phrase “mere men.” Paul recognizes that the behaviour demonstrated in the Corinthian Church is normal human behaviour – but in doing so he seeks to remind the Church that they are not “mere men”, they are not “mere women”, they are not “mere teenagers.”

NIV Romans 8:37 *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

Or:

NLT Romans 8:37 *No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.*

“Overwhelming victory” doesn't sound to me like trying to imitate Jesus and falling short. It doesn't sound to me like burning out and giving up. It doesn't sound to me like withdrawing or remaining static.

“Overwhelming victory” is something that will never be realised unless we persevere in our faith, persevere in following Jesus, persevere not only in allowing the Holy Spirit to transform our spiritual lives, but by deciding to do whatever we can to see our faith reflected in what we *do*.

Challenge

Following Jesus may not be as romantic a notion as dropping everything, leaving our past lives behind and riding off behind Jesus into the sunset.

Following Jesus may mean doing something within the limitations of our everyday lives and *despite* the limitations of our lives.

Jesus knows each of our situations, He knows how busy life is, He knows we need to sleep, and yet He still calls us and gives us His commands and teaches us that faith is something we *do*.

Following Jesus is about exchanging our ways of doing life for God's. You know, if there's something we really want to do then we will always find a way to make it work. If we want something bad enough, if we're desperate for something then nothing can stop us getting it or doing it.

I wonder what would happen to this town if we wanted to see God's Kingdom displayed that strongly?

I wonder what would happen to Waiuku if we were that desperate to demonstrate our love for God?

I wonder what this Church might accomplish for the Name of Jesus if we developed a resolve that said 'nothing will get in the way of us fulfilling God's purposes through us.'

NIV 2 Peter 1:3 *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*

It's so easy to encounter resistance and give up:

'I tried reading my Bible every day but just couldn't keep it up,' 'I tried going to a small group but it was just too much for me after work,' 'I tried tithing but have all these bills to pay,' 'I tried praying and worshipping but nothing happened,' 'I tried fasting but just couldn't last,' 'I tried but it was too hard.'

Defeat doesn't come because of the situations we face, defeat comes from within. If we believe that we can't do it, if we accept that the challenges we face are too much for us, then we've defeated ourselves.

If we believe that we can't do it, what is that saying to Jesus who called us and said that we can?

NLT Romans 8:37 *No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.*

Overwhelming victory only ever comes by believing Jesus when He says He has faith in us.

NIV Hosea 6:3 *Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth."*

The Hebrew phrase for "press on" means to 'pursue', 'chase', and 'hunt'. It's not passive, it's active, it takes effort, it takes energy and time and determination. It takes sacrifice. It requires us to make following Jesus our priority and focus and pursue it, chase it, hunt it through the obstacles and dense bush and down cliffs and up mountains until we get there.

NIV Philippians 3:12 *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*

Press on, take hold of, straining toward what is ahead...these are active words, they're not the words of someone who believes that we can be Christians and not have it completely change everything in our lives.

"What we have already attained" is that Jesus has called us as we are and despite all the things that need working on, He has called us "holy" and "righteous". This, we have 'attained' because this is what the Bible calls us when we respond to the call of Jesus – living up to what we have already attained means believing the things about you that Jesus believes and living them.

Conclusion

Responding to the call of Jesus requires something of us.

It requires us to leave behind the limitations we place on ourselves, the limitations our environment and situation places on us and begin to believe the things that Jesus believes about us.

Yes, it requires effort. Yes, it costs us. Yes, it takes perseverance. Yes, we won't always succeed first, second, or third time. But God has said that we *can* do it so we need to develop the persistence to keep on trying.

Exchanging our way of doing life for His means, not only leaving behind old patterns of behaviour and thought, but also amending our view of ourselves with God's view of us.

God sees a forgiven people, a holy people, a nation of priests, the best of the best of the best, those that make the cut, those who can do what Jesus did, those who are more than conquerors.

God sees His children and delights in everyone one of you.

What do you see?

What you see will determine how closely you imitate Jesus.

Will you ask Him to show you what He sees?
Will you believe Him?

What do you see?