

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Matthew 4:12-23 at Victory of the Lamb on January 22, 2017.

Series: Aha!
Today's Focus: The One to Follow

“Jesus Is Worth Following Full-Time”

1. Unconditional Love 2. Ultimate Purpose 3. Unlimited Possibilities

How many of you are aware that our new President uses Twitter to say stuff? What I was curious about this week is how many people actually follow him on Twitter because that's one of the things you do on Twitter. You *follow* people. And I quickly learned that 20.5 million people follow him on Twitter which seems like a lot, doesn't it?

But it actually puts him at #65 on the list of top 100 most followed Twitter accounts which got me thinking, “I wonder who the top 3 are.” I figured surely the people of earth with all our collective wisdom would seek to follow and learn from the wisest, most insightful people on the planet—those who have the power to change lives in 140 characters or less....right?

I think you know where I'm going with this. You know who the top three most followed Twitter accounts in the world are? 1) Katy Perry who has 95 million followers 2) Justin Bieber 3) Taylor Swift. Then I kept scrolling through the list to find the first pastor or teacher of Christianity that I recognized. And guess what? There wasn't a single person in the top 100 most followed Twitter accounts. I was a bit surprised that a leading Muslim teacher is #82. He has 16 million followers. However, there is no Christian teacher with over 5 million followers or anywhere close to the top 100 most followed Twitter accounts.

But what does it mean to *follow* someone these days, anyway, whether it's on Twitter or Facebook or Instagram or a YouTube channel? What does it mean to *follow* Jesus? Because in our sermon text today from Matthew chapter 4 in the Bible, we're going to hear Jesus call out, “Follow me.” The question is, Is anybody listening? More poignantly, Are you listening? Jesus says, “Follow me.” And we're going to see that he's calling us to a relationship far different than one we might have with somebody on Twitter. After all to follow someone on Twitter doesn't necessarily mean you pay attention to everything they're saying or doing. It doesn't mean you agree with them or endorse everything they say or stand for. Following people on social media is for the most part it seems, a part-time or partial kind of thing. But today we're going to talk about why **Jesus is worth following full-time.**

Our text begins and we find out what it meant for John the Baptist to be a full-time follower of God. ¹²**When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.** You see John preached to the king—Herod the Tetrarch. Herod was a bully and a thug, an adulterer and a womanizer. So John the Baptist told King Herod to repent for the kingdom of God has come near and what happened? He was put in prison for it. And so we get a sort of ominous sense right off the bat that following God full-time won't always be popular. It won't always seem to pay off either, at least in this life. And yet we learn that even when this appears to be the case, God is still at work accomplishing his saving purposes. Here's the kind of thing that happens. ¹³**Leaving Nazareth, he [Jesus] went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—** ¹⁴**to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:**

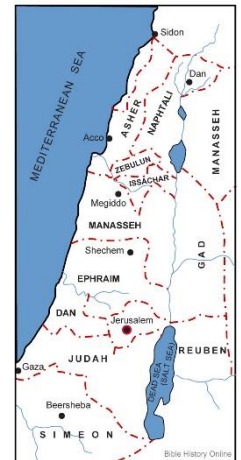


15 **“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—**
 16 **the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”**

So take a look at this map of Israel {map1} in New Testament times. John was baptizing near Bethany. King Herod arrested him and had him held down here in the fortress of Machaerus (which is in modern day country of Jordan). So because of this Jesus went up into Galilee to Capernaum

which as you can see was on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. And if you look at this next map {map2} you can see what God was doing in all this. This map shows Israel the way it was divided up for the twelve tribes of Israel back in Joshua’s day. So you can see that the area where Capernaum was located, where Jesus went, was right up there amongst the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. Many Gentiles or non-Jews lived here because Galilee was the first area that had been conquered by the Assyrians long ago. And so this is where Isaiah, who lived 700 years before Jesus, prophesied that the future the Savior of the World would come to bring light and hope to people living in darkness. And Jesus did!

MAP OF ISRAEL DURING JOSHUA’S TIME



So here’s my point. Sometimes we can wonder “What’s God up to?” when we see faithful people suffering or when there are uncertain political personalities in charge. And yet we can trust that because God is sovereign, he is ultimately in control. He can work bad events out to accomplish good results, even fulfilling his saving plans for the world. By the way, this is exactly what God wants us to pray for as we pray for our leaders in government: **“I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth”** (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

Of course we’re told that we live in a post-truth age, where everything’s relative. In fact, “post-truth” was the Oxford Dictionary word of the year in 2016. But into our post-truth culture God keeps calling out to us through the absolute truth of his word which doesn’t change. And here’s what Jesus did while he was there in Galilee: **17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”** In other words, you know what Jesus was preaching? The same message that he knew got John the Baptist in trouble. “Repent. Humble yourselves before God. Change your ways. Turn from wickedness. Turn towards God before it’s too late because the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Jesus keeps calling out to us today through his word. Are you listening?

At the leadership conference that Pastor Bill and I went to down in Florida a couple weeks ago, one speaker made what I thought were insightful comments about technology use in our world. He said we need to understand that smartphones, those little supercomputers in our pockets, are designed to be leveraged by others to do three things to us.

1. **Monetize** (i.e. make money off you by determining your preferences, making you feel discontent with your life, baiting you into clicking on their ads, and selling you their products)
2. **Desensitize** (i.e. make

you comfortable with sin because it seems like everyone else is) 3. **Polarize** (i.e. to make you look at the world as us vs them. The way they do this is by pushing more and more carefully curated content in front of your eyes based on more of what you like and who you follow to make you think that you and your little tribe are the only ones who are in the know. The result is that you begin to fear or resent or even hate those who aren't in your little tribe and see them as your enemies.)

So this presenter warned us, "Be aware how your smartphone is shaping your heart." This isn't saying you need to become Amish and abandon technology. But are you aware of how your smartphone is shaping your heart? Parents, are you aware how smartphones are shaping your children's hearts in a world where over 90% of teens are on social media and 25% of kids ages 6 and under spend time each day surfing the web? Are you helping them to discern just how much the world is trying to monetize them, desensitize them, and polarize them? And permit me to reframe the question like this: Is your use of technology helping you and your family follow Jesus more fully?

I'm talking about this because I believe this is a defining issue of our generation that the church has to talk about. The world is calling us out more loudly than ever before in more ways than ever before, "Follow me!" Meanwhile, Jesus keeps calling out to us, "Follow me." The only question is, Are you listening?

¹⁸ As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

²¹ Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

There are some astonishing things going on here, wouldn't you agree? Jesus says, "Follow me..." and people do. Andrew and Simon, ordinary guys, **"at once...left their nets and followed him."** Now I do want to quickly point out that this wasn't the very first time they had met Jesus. Andrew, you might recall from last week's sermon text, was one of John the Baptist's followers who started following Jesus when John pointed to him and said, "Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" But now Jesus issues a formal call, "Follow me." They recognize it's a call to follow him full-time. Same with James and John. Jesus says, "Follow me." And **"immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him."**

Friends, what would it take for you to follow Jesus full-time? And understand I'm not saying, "Quit your job. Sever your family ties. Throw your smartphone into Lake Michigan. Abandon your responsibilities and become an itinerant missionary" or something like that. That's not what Jesus calls us to. Now it is true that God has established the public ministry of his word. I'm a pastor and I'm privileged to get to do this full-time. And maybe some of you young men, or some of you who are a little bit older...God is calling to consider full-time public ministry too. If there's an inclination in your heart that this might be the case, Pastor Bill or I would love to talk more with you. Reach out to us.

Yet in a different way, Jesus is calling all of us to follow him full-time in our personal lives. In other words we tend to act as if our relationship with Jesus is a part-time one sometimes, don't we? Like he's just another voice among many that we listen to for advice when we need it, one among many personalities that we partially follow. Like maybe even he's just a once a week person to check in with on Sunday

mornings before the football game. Or someone to pray to when we find ourselves stuck in a jam or a team needs a game winning drive.

In our text we saw Andrew and Peter left behind their nets. James and John left behind their father's boat. What would you need to leave behind to become a full-time follower of Jesus? What distractions would you need to discard so that you have the time for Bible study and prayer? What little dings do you need to ignore more? What distortions of what's really important in your life would need to go? What destructive attitudes? What bitter grudges? What vulgar words? Any sins you need to repent of that are keeping you from following Jesus more fully? When I think of my own life and how often, even as a pastor, I've been part-time follower of Jesus...I'm sure thankful that Jesus didn't consider himself my part-time Savior.

Because really the biggest question of all is maybe the one I haven't asked yet, "Why would someone want to follow Jesus like this? After all, you're talking about something that sounds like it's going to impact every facet of my life, Pastor Ben. Why do you think Jesus is worth following full-time?" And I would say there at least 3 major reasons: 1) Unconditional Love 2) Ultimate Purpose and 3) Unlimited Possibilities.

You see none of those top 100 most popular people on Twitter would willingly lay down their life for you. Katy Perry I don't think really cares about you. Justin Bieber does not love you. I'll let you decide whether you think President Trump really has your best interests in mind or not. But Jesus Christ does! He represents the love of our gracious God who did not stand on the sidelines of the universe as a sort of dispassionate, unconcerned observer of all that's broken and painful. He came down into the thick of it as one of us. He took on our human fragility. He wrapped himself in our pain. He disinvested himself for a time of the riches of heaven in exchange for burial clothes in a borrowed tomb. And the reason why he was willing to do all this? **Unconditional love.**

Jesus didn't care about earthly fame or how many followers or fans he had. He cared about one thing-- your eternal future. No matter how much suffering he would have to endure, he would stop at anything to do all that's possible so that he could have you with him in heaven. Try and find that kind of love in the world. Love that was willing to go to the cross and hang there, die there, suffer hell there when he could have walked away at any time. But he wouldn't and he didn't because of his unconditional love for you and for me and for every single person on this planet. And this kind of love is what Jesus' first followers saw and experienced themselves, unconditional love for everyone, including those Jesus described as "the least of these" whom the rest of society cast aside.

I know that Friday's inauguration of a new president was a pretty big deal. But what matters far more than what happened on Capital Hill is what Jesus Christ did on Calvary's Hill at the cross. Jesus is the Lamb of God who took our shame and our sin and carried it all away. He won a victory over death that he now shares with us. He secured us a new identity as children of God.

The second reason it's worth it to follow Jesus full-time is **ultimate purpose**. Jesus told Andrew and Peter, "**Come, follow me,**" Jesus said, "**and I will send you out to fish for people.**" Part of following Jesus full-time is becoming more and more aware that now every aspect of life is opportunity to influence people in his name. How you live matters. How you express your faith at work, in your neighborhood, and online. How you treat others. What you say. How you approach dating or how you raise your family. How you forgive and how you express love. Every interaction with a fellow human being who is precious to God...it matters. Every aspect of your life has been infused with an ultimate

purpose now of helping other people learn to follow Jesus too. To be a full-time follower of Jesus is to want to help other people become followers of Jesus. It's fishing for people!

Finally, Jesus is worthy of following him full-time because he promises **unlimited possibilities** when we do so. ²³ **Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.**

When you follow Jesus—there's no such thing as a hopeless situation anymore. With God, all things are possible. He hears our prayers. He answers them for our ultimate, eternal good even when we don't always see how at the time. And he can change the earthly dynamics. He can change the situations. He can make dying marriages come alive again with love. He can make dead hearts come alive with faith. He can make forgiveness bloom in the desert. Remember our job is not to change hearts. It's simply to show love and to speak the truth and point to Jesus. The rest...it's up to him. That why to this very day he continues to send out the Holy Spirit who works in us and through us every time we spend time in his word and every time we share his word with others.

Imagine a community where husbands and wives start following Jesus full-time together, where parents start setting healthy boundaries with technology to follow Jesus more fully, where single people are secure in knowing they are loved unconditionally by God, where members of the church start recognizing that every relationship is an opportunity to show love and to speak words of truth. That's not my dream so much as it as God's dream for us who seek to follow Jesus full-time. After all, Jesus is worthy of it. He's the only one who has showed us unconditional love, who has given our lives an ultimate purpose, and who promises unlimited possibilities. Amen.