



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Come and Follow Matthew 4:18-22

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September 6, 2009

After World War II a movement was begun in the United States entitled *The Plain Language Movement*. The goal of the Plain Language Movement is to move government, legal and business writers to use “plain language” in contracts, government reports and business communications. At the heart of the movement is the concept that the average citizen should be able to read a Congressional Bill or a new law and understand it. There are many critics of plain language. One critique is that instead of lifting the masses’ language skills, it reduces language skills to the lowest common denominator. However, if communication is the goal, then plain language is a good tool.

Plain language is also a good idea for preachers, teachers and those who would share the gospel of Christ. Charles Wesley used to preach his sermons to those who were uneducated and illiterate and ask them to tell him any word they did not understand. It was his way of making sure that the message of the gospel could be understood by all people.

Jesus was a teacher who practiced plain language; his stories and parables were about real people and everyday occurrences. Now, it might be true that there are some sayings of Jesus which escape our immediate understanding, but that has to do more with cultural difference than the lack of plain language. In the next few weeks we are going to be looking at some of the sayings of Jesus, in particular the beatitudes. What did Jesus say, what did it mean when it was spoken, and what does it mean to us today? – those questions will be our emphasis. We will look at these short sayings of plain language and discover the depth of Jesus’ teaching. Today, I want us to turn to another plain saying and consider its meaning in our lives.

The plain phrase I want us to consider today is *Come and follow*. Jesus used the term often and he uttered these words on several occasions. He spoke them to Peter and Andrew along the seashore; he said them again to Levi the tax collector; he told the “balking inquirer”, in regards to the burying the dead and following Jesus, to “Come and follow me”; he repeated them to the rich young ruler who was looking for satisfaction in his religious life. The simple words of Jesus may be his most profound: “Come and follow me!”

When we hear these words we have many responses. I think sometimes we hear the simple words of Jesus and then say “That sounds like what I want to do, but how do I get started?” In other words, *come and follow* is not plain language after all. I think some hear this call of Jesus and respond “There must be something more. It cannot be that simple. I need some rules, doctrines, and rites if I am going to be able to achieve this word from Jesus.” A third response might be that we completely understand and do not follow. We might be like the rich young ruler who understood the significance of this call to follow and walked away sad. We understand all too well the cost, and it is more than we are willing to forfeit. *Come and Follow* is plain language, but plain language does not always mean simple or easy.

When Jesus says to us “Come and follow”, what do we need to hear? We need to hear the call of God right where we live. Jesus came to the Sea of Galilee that day and was walking on the shore. I am sure he was not the only one walking on the shore that day: this was a busy fishing village; there were many people at work. I like to imagine it to

be the equivalent of a Monday in our culture. You know how Monday is – it is the day when all we can think about is work. We might have had a relaxing or exciting weekend; we might have something planned come Friday or Saturday, but this is Monday and a week of work is staring us in the face. Monday is the day we have to focus on work and get our schedules, appointments, and tasks in order for the week. Most of us are not allowed the luxury of thinking of other things on a Monday. I picture this event occurring on what we might call a Monday. Now, I know in this culture there is nothing special about Monday. In fact, everyday except the Sabbath Day is a work day and everyday is similar in tasks, chores, work, and play. The routine is very similar except for the Sabbath Day or for Days of Festivals. That is why the people looked so forward to the Sabbath and to Festivals. It was that which broke the monotony of everyday life. Worship and the keeping of the Sabbath were not supposed to be chores; they were to be gifts – gifts from God to bring newness and change to lives that were essentially filled with the same thing everyday.

So, Jesus comes walking on the Sea of Galilee on one of those days . . . a day like any other day. It is in this setting that he sees Peter and Andrew who are casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. The way the text is written it indicates to us that Jesus' call to Peter and Andrew occurs right in the middle of their work. The verb *casting* is a present and active verb, meaning they were casting and continuing to cast. It has the sense of continual motion and thus continual work. Peter and Andrew's minds would not have been on following Jesus but on casting the net. It is in the middle of work that Jesus speaks the simple words "Come and follow." In similar fashion and a continual calling of people, Jesus sees John and James in a boat with their father Zebedee as they are mending or preparing their nets. Again, the term is active and continual. In that moment, James and John are focused on preparing the nets for their day's work. Jesus also calls them and they immediately left the boat and their father and followed Jesus.

Notice where Jesus is when he calls his first disciples. He calls them right in the middle of living. All of the concerns of life are found in this short description of Jesus' early followers. They are fo-

cused on work and provision. They are with family and in community. They have identity as fishermen within this community. When you think about it, these are the very ways we identify our lives.

Read most biographical sketches or obituaries and you will discover these same elements: we are defined by our work, or our preparation for work that is our education, our relationship in community, how we are known and described, and, of course, our relationship with others. Here, it is brothers, sons and business colleagues. There is one thing missing in the description of these men: their relationship with God – that is where Jesus comes into the picture. To four men whose lives could have been easily defined by everyday tasks and relationships, Jesus comes calling them to something more. Jesus says, "Come and follow me."

There is more to life than how we would normally define our lives. Jesus' simple call of plain language reminds us that our lives can mean more than just the everyday routine of striving, surviving, and thriving. Our lives can have an eternal purpose.

Too many times we believe that Jesus' call can only be heard in some solemn and reverent moment, or to hear the voice of Jesus, we must be in a place of solitude and removed from the busyness of the day. To be sure, we do need moments of solitude. Jesus modeled for us the need to get away alone and pray. Yet, he always returned to his companions and others. Why? Jesus knew that God's call would be lived out, not separate from everyday life but, right in the middle of everyday life.

Because the call of Jesus comes in the middle of life, then surely it also transforms everyday life. Jesus indicates this with his play on words when he says "Come and follow me and I will make you fishers of men." The gifts you have can be used for eternal purposes. That which seems ordinary and mundane can become, in Christ, sacred and extraordinary.

Jesus is the living example of how that which is ordinary and mundane becomes sacred when we hear God's call in our lives. The proclamation of John is "The word became flesh." Jesus, the living

word of God, becomes ordinary or like you and me. In Jesus' life the things of this earth take on new meaning. Bread and water become symbols for real life through Jesus. Bread and wine become symbols for Jesus' sacrifice. A bowl and towel used for cleaning of dusty feet become symbols of servant hood and humility. A little boy's lunch becomes the beginning of abundance from God. The cross becomes a place that is no longer a curse but a blessing and way to life and not death. Jesus is all about taking that which is ordinary and mundane and making it have eternal meaning.


*Come and follow* comes in the middle of life, and it takes a life that is defined by everything this world uses for definition and redefines it in light of eternity. That is what Jesus wants to do in our lives as well. He walks just as easily down the halls of skyscrapers and school buildings as he did on the seashore. He walks with ease down aisles in shopping malls and grocery stores. He is found in bleachers of ball games and concerts. He is just as much at home in our houses as he is in "his house." *Come and follow* is Jesus' call to us right now in the middle of our living.

This plain language is a call to the future. *Come and follow* indicates that Jesus is going somewhere. There is a futuristic essence to this call of Jesus. Although Jesus does not say "Leave your boats, father, and businesses", the call seems to imply that to go into the future with Jesus there is a need to let go of the past. The Greek term for *follow* most of the time has the same root as *road*. Therefore, to follow is to share the road with Jesus. The only thing we need roads for is to go someplace else. There is a call to follow that does come in the middle of life, but it is a call to go somewhere beyond this present moment in life.

If anything, it is a call to focus on our future and not our past; it is a call to remind us that Jesus is more concerned about who we can be than who we have been. Earnest Campbell remarks in a sermon on this text, "Fan the pages of the gospel

record and you will be startled to discover how little time Jesus spent allowing people to expand on a burdened past."<sup>1</sup>

Leaving is not always easy. Letting go of our past is sometimes the most difficult thing we will ever do. Even when the past is painful, it is ours. It is something that belongs to us and that we believe if we let go of it, we will lose our very self. Yet, Jesus' call to come and follow is a call to move forward. It has been said that Jesus has two hands: one points us into the future and the other steadies us as we go; there is no hand of Jesus pointing to the past.



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*Come and follow* also bids us come to Jesus. I think that the plain language of “Come and follow me” cuts through everything we try to build upon the “Christian journey”, and it reduces our faith to its basic essence: to be a “Christian” is to be “follower of Jesus.” The promise that Jesus gives us is he: “Come and follow me.” What do we get when we follow Jesus? We get Jesus. We learn about Jesus. We come into relationship with Jesus. We begin to see and hear Jesus. The promise of being a follower is Jesus.

The classic book on Christian discipleship is the late theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work entitled *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this wonderful book, the great theologian calls the reader to consider the cost of discipleship. As Bonhoeffer is writing of Levi's calling from Jesus, he writes the following words:

The call of Jesus is follow me or run along behind me! That is all. To follow in the steps of Jesus is something void of all content. It gives us no intelligible program for a way of life, no goal or idea to strive after. It is not a cause which human calculation might deem worthy of our devotion, even the devotion to ourselves. What happens at the call is the follower leaves all that he has –but not because he thinks that he might be doing something worth while, but

simply for the sake of the call. The disciple simply burns his boats and goes ahead. He is called out. The old life is left behind and completely surrendered. The disciple is dragged out of his relative security and safety into absolute insecurity... out of what is finite into that which is infinite. This call is nothing else but bondage to Jesus Christ alone, completely breaking through every program, every ideal, and every set of laws. No other significance is possible since Jesus is the only significance. Besides Jesus nothing has any significance. He alone matters.

Jesus alone matters. That is pretty plain language in and of itself. Jesus calls us to come and follow him. The promises that we associate with this call and the Christian life lose all their meaning without Jesus. Eternal life is only eternal or god-like because it is life with Jesus. Abundant life is only abundant in a sense that life is lived with Jesus. A peace-filled life is only peaceful because it is lived with the Prince of Peace. A life of hope is only possible when the one who is our hope is our life. The whole thing... the only thing... the only one that matters is Jesus. Our promise from Jesus when we follow him is nothing more and nothing less than Jesus.

Plain language and simple words. Four words that make all the difference in the world: "Come and follow me." When? Right now in the very middle

of life. There is no other time but right now, just like you are, in the very busyness of this life you can choose to follow Jesus. That is where his call is heard. What is the call? Follow Him. Come and let us join Jesus on the road, the road that releases the past to God's grace and takes hold of the future by faith. Who do we follow? Let's follow Jesus. Jesus is the only one that matters.

It is said that the Apostle John in old age would only repeat to his disciples "God is love" and "Love one another." When his disciples asked him to teach them something else, John replied "There is nothing else, just love, love, love." In the debris of the ancient church of Saint John on the hill of ayasuluk at the site of the ancient Ephesus is this graffiti "Holy John, evangelist, theologian, evangelist and theologian of love."<sup>2</sup> John's life and theology was one word. It was plain language – it was love.

What if one day our lives could be summed up in a similar manner? What if it was just one word, one word of plain language? What if it could be said of us: There is nothing else...Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. That is all there is.

So, let me put it plainly. Jesus said "Come and Follow Me." ❁

<sup>1</sup>Earnest T. Campbell, *Follow Me* as found in *A Chorus of Witnesses*, Thomas Long and Cornelius Pantinga, Jr., Editors (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmann Publishing Company, 1994), 168.

<sup>2</sup>Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Publishing, 2009), 110-111.

