

Woods Chapel Bible Fellowship
Sermon - January 1, 2006 - Christmas morning service
Pastor Rodger Williams

“FOLLOW THE LEADER”

Matthew 4:18-22

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. And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

INTRODUCTION

God created our minds with amazing capacity. It contains one hundred billion neurons held together by two trillion packing cells which makes it capable of storing six hundred memories per second for your entire lifetime. On the average, that comes to one trillion, four hundred nineteen billion, twelve million memories per brain, per life, which means that this amazing lump of flesh that God has situated inside our skulls records virtually everything we ever do or think or say or hear or experience... everything! I can't imagine the number of megs of ram the human brain contains, much less its CPU speed!

Now if you are like me, when it comes to your brain... your problem isn't storage—it's retrieval. Just last month I found myself inside a store, and I couldn't remember why I was there. The information was up there, I was on a mission, but I just couldn't retrieve the data. I took me about 15 seconds to clear my head so I could remember what I needed to find in that store. All that reminds me of the story of two elderly women who were discussing the problems of growing older. One commented, “The worst thing is when your memory starts to go. I've known you all my life and I can't think of your name at the moment. By the way, what is it?” The second lady thought for a moment and said, “Do you need an answer right now?”

All of us, no matter what our age, have memory retrieval problems from time to time. And for this reason, today as we begin a new year of ministry together, I felt it was important for us as a church to remind ourselves what the Christian life is all about. The danger is we get so busy in our routine that we master the rituals of our faith, but we miss out on the reality. The worst thing that would happen in 2006 is that we miss out on the reality of our faith.

We are reminded in our passage that the Christian life is following the Leader. We are followers of Christ, and are to be known as followers of Christ. This increasingly close proximity to Him transforms us, and results in a clear reflection of His character. We replicate grace, mercy, love, justice, compassion, truth, and righteousness of Christ our Leader. Followers refuse to be satisfied with just being saved and on their way to heaven. For followers, Christianity is a relationship, an adventure, a passionate pursuit of Christ.

We hear His voice. It was the voice of Christ who simply said, “Follow Me,” with no conditions, no negotiations, no particulars, no contractual exceptions—just follow. It was the first and last thing Jesus said to Peter (Matthew 4:19; John 21:19, 22). It is the beginning and the end of what it means to be a Christian. Everything in between is measured by it. Starting out as a follower with a commitment to come after Him as the all-compelling center of life is the easy step. Staying on the road with Him is the challenge. Let's look at that New Year's challenge this morning.

I. Following Christ: It is a directional thing.

When Christ said, “*Follow Me*” (Matthew 4:19), He used a specific word that underscores that followers are to

embrace Him as the essence of their existence. The word literally means to “come after.” It means that we are to position Christ as our singular pursuit in all things. With every thought, choice, and response to life, followers move in His steps. He defines and establishes our view of every possession and pursuit. Following is a directional thing.

While true followers acknowledge Christ as the strategic center, most of us stop short of that. We seem to settle for accepting His salvation from hell; praising Him; find comfort and joy in Him; be intrigued by Him, but few are bent toward following Him unconditionally. However, that makes all the difference in the world.

I have visited with grown men who broke down in tears as they told me how their life had been whiplashed by their own desires and agendas. They cried out, “I forgot about following Christ. I’ve gotten so scrambled up. It’s so simple. I want to follow. I just want to follow Christ.”

We need ask ourselves a variety of questions: “Am I on the road with Him?” “Where is Christ on this issue?” While the world loses itself in speculation and experimentation about the meaning of life, the follower of Christ has a certain and singular focus. Whatever He is, that is where the follower will be. Wherever He goes, that is the direction of the follower’s life. He will take us to places and unveil perspectives that we have never known. He chose to cast Himself as a servant; He had unbelievable tolerance for sinners and tax collectors; He had intolerance for religious hypocrisy and pride; His clarity for truth and arresting wisdom captures our attention and our imaginations. Following is a directional thing—we walk in His steps.

II. Following Christ: It is a personal thing.

A. He personalizes our relationship by initiating a call to follow Him.

In our text, the Lord Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee and issued a personal call to Andrew and Peter, James and John to follow Him. He personally calls you and me to follow Him. Not only does He initiate a divine call on our lives, He also bought us with the price of His own life on the cross. He lures us with persistent love into a deepening relationship with Him. He loves us all the way home to heaven.

Perhaps the most important aspect of our pursuit of Christ is the realization that He wants and pursues a personal relationship with us. Revelation 3:20 is often thought of as an invitation to our salvation experience, but the verse actually speaks to Christ’s persistent desire for intimacy with His followers. He pictures Himself as knocking at the door of our hearts, wanting to come in: “*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.*”

It is our heart’s door. That is the pivotal issue. If we do not understand that, we will not get to know Him personally. He wants to know and fellowship with the real me.

However, that can be an unsettling thought. If He comes to meet me here...

- (1) He finds things that He will want to get rid of right away: that sinful pleasure, that habit, that long-standing bitterness, etc., etc., etc.
- (2) He will want to be in charge of my desires, decisions, wants, and will. He is the sovereign God of the universe and rightfully holds complete authority.
- (3) He will want to move me away from the clutter of irrelevancies and trivia.
- (4) He sees me as I really am.

Regardless of all that, He will still come in—gladly. He will work through the issues in a patient and persistent way—redecorating and transforming our hearts.

B. We were built for a relationship with God.

Following is a personal thing. As we have seen, Christ's call to "follow" means that we are to "come after Him." Matthew uses a different Greek word to characterize the disciples response. Verse 20 says that Andrew and Peter *they left their nets and followed* (this different Greek word) *Him*; Verse 22 says that James and John *left their boat and their father, and followed Him*. The word "*followed*" in those two verses is a technical word used of individuals in that day who were known to their friends and others around them as followers. First, it described a deepening relationship to the one they were following; and second, it meant radical reformation because of the influence of the leader on his life. This identity was so clear in Christ's day that calling someone a follower would be no different from saying of someone, "He's a trucker" or "She's a doctor."

For us then, following means to adopt Jesus as the local rabbi of our lives and surrender; to sit under His wisdom in order to learn from Him; and to serve Him in every way possible. It means to give Him the highest priority as the supreme relationship of life out of which every other relationship and activity is defined and directed. I am a follower.

III. Following Christ: It is an outreach thing.

A. Following Christ means that He wants to make us fishers of men.

When Christ concluded His call with the admonition, "*I will make you fishers of men,*" He was giving fair notice that followers can expect to experience significant change. When we follow Him, nothing is safe from His reforming touch. He is committed to reforming our conduct and our character. Little else matters to Him.

He sets on a mission—to make Christ known. The reason the Lord leaves us on earth instead of taking us to heaven immediately, is to be His ambassadors—to be fishers of men.

B. Our lifestyle can be one of invest and invite.

I would challenge you in this new year to make outsiders your priority. Take on the responsibility of making a personal investment in someone's life and bring them to Woods Chapel. Invest and invite.

Our church has encouraged what is called, "lifestyle evangelism," or relational evangelism. The idea is that everyone should reprioritize their friendships to make sure they were investing in someone who needed Christ. This encourages spiritual dialogue in a safe context of authentic friendship. It's the opposite of the typical "car salesman" approach to evangelism. Lifestyle evangelism works in concert with the way relationships naturally happen, and it is something that almost every believer can do.

The only problem with this approach is that it often comes up short. What do you do when you have taken a friend as far as you can? Where does your friend go then? How do you explain issues you may not feel equipped to explain? That's where "invest and invite" comes into play. The "invite" allows you to bring a friend into an environment where issues can be addressed. We want to create environments here at Woods Chapel to help our unchurched friends move to the next step in their spiritual journey. Think two words this year: (1) invest, and (2) invite. We want our friends to meet our friend Jesus.

IV. Following Christ: It is a church thing.

A. Since Christ is the head of the church, we should follow Him.

"*He is also head of the body, the church...*" (Colossians 1:18). The effective church always begins with the non-negotiated commitment of follower-ship. Only as the church responds to His commands, allows Him to knit us together as a family, can the body function healthily and properly. As the church follows Him, then and only then can

there be big wins for the church.

B. The five G's:

What is a win for us as a church? What are the most important things we want to see at Woods Chapel? The five G's are our measure of a win. Let's review them.

1. Grace—Christ followers have abandoned their attempts to earn God's favor through their own accomplishments and have individually received Christ's free gift of eternal life—by His grace alone—through faith alone. A win for us is when we see people respond to God's grace.

The message of saving grace and growing grace must be appropriated and promoted. We need to be constant in proclaiming the grace of God through what Jesus Christ did on the cross. We need to be investing in people's lives and demonstrate how God's grace has changed us, and then invite them to experience the same thing. We then want to see believers continue to rely on His grace as they follow Him.

2. Growth—Growth is our ongoing response to God's grace over a lifetime. We cooperate with the Holy Spirit to reshape us from the inside out, and it is also owning our responsibility for deepening our faith through the spiritual disciplines—authentic prayer, application-oriented Bible study, sincere worship—as well as by resisting those things that would retard our growth. It is a win when we see God's people at Woods Chapel growing in their relationship with Christ.

3. Groups—Relationships aren't optional in church. They are the church. When we are saved we are adopted into a family. We are not independent, because we are a community of believers. We interact with each other, so we can be encouraged, supported, challenged, and lovingly held accountable. Just some of the groups at Woods Chapel are: Growth groups, Sunday School, worship team, men's or women's Bible studies, In Touch, etc. Jesus modeled this community of believers that takes place in a group with His disciples. It is a win for us when we see God's people interacting with each other in groups.

4. Gifts—God deposited in all our lives spiritual gifts to be utilized for the common good of the body of Christ. Everyone plays an important role at Woods Chapel because of his or her unique giftedness and personality that God will use to minister to others. We need each other. It is a win for us when we see God's people using their gifts in ministry.

5. Giving—In Jesus Christ we have a daunting example of giving. He gave up all He had so that the world could be reconciled with God. We need to be generous investors in the cause of Christ to further His kingdom work. We need to be redeemed to the point of affecting our resources so that ministry can go on unhindered. It is a win for us when we see God's people investing in God's work at Woods Chapel. Jesus said it this way, *“For where your treasure is there will your heart be also.”*

Life Application

(1) If I refuse to pay the cost of crosses, then I cannot be a follower.

These disciples left their profession, left their nets, left their boats, and left their family. Our willingness to pay the price of a cross is the pivotal issue of being a follower of Jesus. In Mark 8:34 Jesus said, *“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.”* The sequence in Christ's call to crosses is important to note. He calls us first to “deny ourselves.” That means dropping anything for His sake.

Any thought of a Christianity without a cross is a deeply flawed view of the faith. For a disciple to say, “I'll take Christ, but not a cross,” is to deny the Christ we desire to follow. The very nature of His character and His cause creates an environment in which opposition and pressure are always possible.

Think how ludicrous it would be for an army recruiter to enlist troops to carry out a just and compelling mission in hostile territory and then promise that there would be no stress or strain in the operation. More ludicrous still would be for the troops to enlist yet demand that they never be placed in jeopardy. If I refuse to pay the cost of crosses, then I cannot be a follower.

(2) Cross-bearing should always have eternity in view.

Cross-bearing must always be seen in the perspective of the long view. There is something better for us than just a cross—something eternally better. We have somehow come to believe that this world is where maximum peace and happiness should be enjoyed. We have either not known or have forgotten that this nasty, sinful world is of short duration, and fullness and happiness will be our guaranteed experience in the world to come. One scholar has suggested that if we knew the extent of the Fall, we'd be surprised that anything good happens at all in this life. At the border of heaven, there is a sign that reads, "Check your crosses here. Unnecessary for the future—unnecessary Forever."

I want to close with the story of John and Betty Stam, missionaries to China. In September 1934, after they had been married nearly a year and had just given birth to a baby girl, John and Betty were assigned to a station in the province where missionaries had been evacuated two years earlier. Communist activity, they were told, had diminished, and both China Inland Mission and the local magistrate guaranteed their safety.

Unfortunately, they had seriously misjudged the situation. The Stams arrived at the end of November, and before the first week of December had passed, they had been attacked in their home by Communist soldiers. Though placed under heavy guard, John was permitted to send a letter to his superiors.

The next day after the letter was written, the Stams were forced to make a grueling march to another town. After they arrived at their destination, they were stripped of their outer clothes and paraded through the streets and publically ridiculed, while the Communist guerilla leaders urged the townspeople to come out in full force to view the execution.

Although the baby girl was spared and secretly delivered into the hands of another missionary family, it seemed that for John and Betty all was lost. The Stams had only spent a short time in China, and their efforts to advance the cause of Christ had barely gotten off the ground. But they followed Christ regardless, knowing that as long as they were faithful, He would be glorified whether it be through their life or their death.

Found in their things was this poem, one of Betty's favorites and written by E. H. Hamilton:

Afraid? Of What?
To feel the spirit's glad release?
To pass from pain to perfect peace,
The strife and strain of life to cease?
Afraid—of that?

Afraid? Of What?
Afraid to see the Savior's face?
To hear His welcome, and to trace
The glory gleam from wounds of grace?
Afraid—of that?

Afraid? Of What?
A flash—a crash—a pierced heart!
Darkness—light—O heaven's art!
Each wound of His a counterpart!
Afraid—of that?

Afraid? Of What?
To do by death what life could not?

Baptize with blood a stony plot
Till souls shall blossom from the spot?
Afraid—of that?

Their martyrdom had far-reaching effects for the cause of Christ. Many young people, inspired by the Stams' sacrifice, dedicated their lives to missions, and the year 1935 saw the greatest amount of money come into China Inland Mission since the stock market crash in 1929. Bearing the cross of death for the cause of Christ became legendary among the remnant of Chinese Christians. By the time all foreign missionaries were expelled by the Communists in 1949, there were an estimated one million believers in that country. Today, as the door begins to crack open again, the estimates are that there are more than seventy million believers in China who are faithful to His cause.

If following doesn't embrace the long view, then crosses will indeed become unbreakable and irrelevant.

Those who follow Christ never pay a price—not really. They invest the weight of their cross in the glory of the King and the gain of His everlasting kingdom.

In 2006... let's follow Him!

1-1-06 A.M. An expositional message for the New Year

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