

BaptistWay Bible Series for December 18: Called to follow Jesus

December 6, 2011

Thomas Paine is credited with saying “Lead, follow or get out of the way.” Leading is the glamorous option. Getting out of the way is the selection of those who don’t want to participate for a myriad of reasons. Following is the opposite of leading. It isn’t glamorous. It’s the position of the masses, the inconsequential, the seemingly unimportant.

Churches frequently are credited with complaining that they need more leaders. No church has enough leaders. Ask a pastor about the needs the church has, and all too often the answer is leadership.

How about some followship? How many churches genuinely have a long list of followers. If Thomas Paine has analyzed life correctly, then we recognize a lack of those who lead in the church, and certainly there is an abundance of those who have gotten out of the way and are watching on the sidelines. How about followers? Do we have enough believers who actually are following—following Jesus, following the God-placed leaders in the local church, following God’s will?

Jesus begins his public ministry (Matthew 4:12-17)

After recording Jesus’ baptism and temptations, Matthew noted that John the Baptist was imprisoned (by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great). At this point, Jesus began his public ministry. He “withdrew” from Nazareth for the larger city of Capernaum.

Capernaum, like Nazareth, was in Galilee which is where the tribes of

Zebulun and Naphtali were located. These tribes were in the northern part of Israel and were usually two of the tribes to be conquered first by invaders from the North. They were the first to experience the darkness of subjugation at the hands of the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C.

In the midst of such darkness, Isaiah addressed a message of hope to the defeated Israelites, and Matthew quotes that message in vv. 15-16. A light was coming. Salvation was at hand. God's face would shine its glory on his people again. The fulfillment of this prophecy would come through a child, a son (Isaiah 9:6).

Matthew saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. He was that child, that son, who brought light to those in darkness and in the shadow of death. John 1:5 speaks of the Word, Jesus, coming into the world as light, and the darkness has not overcome it.

As Jesus burst onto the scene of Capernaum, he proclaimed a simple message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Jesus' message continued John the Baptist's. It was a message calling for repentance, for a life change. This change was needed, because God was about to work his wonders. The people were going to see God in action, and for that, they were going to need to be prepared through repentance.

Note that Matthew said Jesus began to preach this message. Evidently, it was a common theme Jesus proclaimed, although he is not recorded in the Gospels repeating this message. The reader of Matthew should keep this message in mind while reading the rest of the story.

The call of the first disciples to follow (Matthew 4:18-22)

As Jesus walked through Galilee, he came upon two brothers fishing, Peter and Andrew. Jesus invited them to come and "follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Both brothers dropped their fishing nets and began following Jesus.

Why would two people just drop everything and follow Jesus? What had they heard about Jesus? Did they know him? John's Gospel gives more detail to the story in John 1:35-42. It seems John the Baptist actually pointed out Jesus as the messiah to Andrew. In turn, Andrew brought his brother Peter to Jesus.

Still, Matthew's message focuses upon the decision these brothers made to drop their fishing gear and follow Jesus. Their fishing gear symbolized everything. These two dropped everything to follow Jesus.

Their decision to follow Jesus involved commitment. Total commitment. This commitment involved a complete lifestyle change. How could they make such a quick decision?

Jesus gives an excellent example to follow in calling others to the faith. Jesus came to Peter and Andrew where they were. He did not ask them to come for a visit. Jesus met them at their place of work.

Also, Jesus used language that resonated with them. He spoke about fishing which was their occupation.

Then, Jesus challenged these two with a task. This task was no ordinary job. Just the way Jesus spoke, there was an air of significance to this task. It wasn't just supplying fish to feed people, it was getting people to encounter God.

Of course, these two could not refuse such an incredible offer from Jesus. This offer was no less than to give people the opportunity to let God change their lives, to bring light into their darkness.

After meeting Peter and Andrew, Jesus met another pair of brothers, James and John. Jesus invited them to follow, and they left everything to follow Jesus.

To be a follower of Jesus, total commitment is needed. Such commitment will involve sacrifice. Peter, Andrew, James and John all could make a list of items they gave up and sacrificed in order to follow Jesus.

If we asked the people attending our churches today to list the things they had given up in order to follow Jesus, what would be on that list? Would the list include changing jobs, making a geographic move or leaving one's family?

Let's return to Isaiah 9, the passage Matthew quoted in verses 15-16. Isaiah told the people living in darkness to have hope in the one who was going to bring light to them. Isaiah was certain his prophecy would take place, because the coming one would have an insatiable zeal for God (Isaiah 9:7). Jesus fulfilled the prophecy, and he has an insatiable zeal for the Father. If you're a follower of Jesus, shouldn't you have his type of zeal, too?