

The First Followers

John 1:35-51

Call: Ps 27:1, 4 (NIV)

Scripture: Eph 1:17-19a (NIV)

I. Intro

Good morning and welcome again to my house. My name is Shawn Reese. I'm one of the pastors at PBCC.

I'm not a social media person. But, in our world, to follow someone is to click a button on a website. And, I am told that you get special privileges by clicking that button. When you "follow" someone, you find that you'll see their updates, their posts and generally all of their activity.

But, in the real world, what does it mean to follow someone? Follow simply means to go behind another person or as Bunnie said, to "follow the leader." It is to go in the same direction and do the same thing as another person. And, of course, this implies that to "follow" someone or something means to give up going in other directions and doing other actions.

Now, the reality is that every one of us follows someone or something. The question is never will I follow? The question is always who or what am I following?

In the Gospel of John, following Jesus is obviously a key theme. But, it is usually combined with another key theme in John: abide. Coming, following and abiding with Jesus are essential characteristics of a disciple in John. And, what are the essential privileges of discipleship? In other words, what will we see when we come, follow and abide? We've seen a few privileges already, back in the prologue. To follow Jesus is to live in the light, to become a child of the living God and to have his presence with us. Today, we will hear Jesus, himself, make his first two great promises to those who come, follow and abide.

So, whether you are new to Jesus or have been with him for a long time, I invite you to come and see this morning with fresh eyes. We'll begin reading this morning in John 1:35.

II. The First Three Followers (35-42)

35 The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" 37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 38 Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" 39 He said to them, "Come and you will see." So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. 40 One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ). 42 He brought him

to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter). (ESV)

A. The Next Day

We are now on day three of the first week of Jesus' ministry, and we are still at Bethany beyond the Jordan. As I said last week, John is going to give us Jesus' first week of ministry as a way of saying here is the first week of the launch of the New Creation. Two of John the Baptist's disciples see John pointing at Jesus, hear John's witness of Jesus as the Lamb of God and begin following Jesus.

B. What are you seeking?

We then get two questions which begin the journey of faith for followers. But, they are also good reorienting questions for all of us. The first question comes from Jesus. It is the first words spoken by him in this Gospel. We usually think of Jesus as having all the answers, but he is famously known to ask a lot of questions. According to one writer, he asks over 300 questions in the Gospels (Croasmun, 7). This is his way of engaging all kinds of people, followers, skeptics and strangers. He invites responses from the people he meets, and then genuinely listens to their answers.

"What are you seeking?" This *is* the fundamental question of the Gospel of John. As we proceed through the Gospel, we'll see people seeking all kinds of things. Some people seeking their own glory (5:44, 7:18, 8:50). Some people are seeking Jesus, but only because of what he can do for them (6:24). Many will seek to have Jesus arrested and killed (5:18, 7:1, 7:19-20, 11:8, etc). Meanwhile, Jesus seeks to do the will of his heavenly father (5:30) (Croasmun, 125).

What are you seeking? It's a searching question and worthy of consideration. What are *you* seeking? What are *you* looking for? Why did you tune into our live-stream service this morning? In our shelter in place, many people are seeking to go to the beach or to have sports back on or simply to be with friends. But, under normal circumstances, many people also seek their own glory. Many people seek grades and achievements. Many people seek pleasure and comfort. Many people seek money and security. Many people seek truth. Many people seek love. What are you seeking?

As someone has said, we are intentional beings. We need purpose in our lives. And, what we seek reveals a lot about who we are. Every day we wake up, we chase after all kinds of things. Who or what we seek to follow will determine much of our actions that day. But, even more, who or what we seek to follow will ultimately determine the direction of our lives.

So, what are you seeking as you tune in this morning?

C. Where are you abiding?

The second question comes from the disciples, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" The word used here is abide. "Jesus, where are you abiding?" If you know John, you know that the word "abide" (meno) is a key word throughout the Gospel. We already saw it twice last week when

the Spirit remained on Jesus. The Spirit abided with him.

It's an interesting question to ask. Where are you abiding? Do you think they are asking for Jesus' address for where he lives? I don't think so. I think they are saying, "John the Baptist is telling us to not follow him anymore. He's telling us to follow you. So, if we follow you, what will we find? Where are you abiding Jesus so that we will know what we are getting ourselves into if we attach ourselves to you?"

And, Jesus replies, "Come and you will see. Come and you will see what you are getting yourselves into." This is the first word of command from Jesus. As I said when I introduced our series two weeks ago, this is the invitation to would-be followers. It's an invitation to come, and if you do, you will see.

These first two followers accept Jesus' invitation, and the church is born. They come and abide with Jesus for the day. I think John is saying here that every day is an act of coming and abiding. Everyday, we must choose to follow him for that day. It's one day at a time when following Jesus. So, will you choose to abide with Jesus for the next 24 hours?

D. The Witness of John

John then tells us that one of the followers is Andrew, Peter's brother. Andrew is always known as Peter's brother. Even here he is introduced as Peter's brother before Peter is introduced. Talk about being in the shadow of your sibling. But, here we also see Andrew's primary characteristic. Every time we meet him in this Gospel, he is introducing someone else to Jesus (6:8-9, 12:22). That is Andrew, the evangelist.

The other follower is anonymous. Who is this other one? I think this one is the Apostle John, the writer of this Gospel. So, on the heels of John the Baptist's witness is now John the Apostle's witness, which is the content of this fourth Gospel. This is important because it shows that there is a witness besides Peter, even a witness before Peter. In the Synoptics, the other three Gospels, Peter is the chief observer and interpreter of Jesus. Here, we get another witness besides Peter. And, this witness, John's witness, will take us deeper and provide more penetrating insights into who Jesus is than the Synoptics.

E. The Witness of these First Two

So, who is Jesus? These first followers witness to several titles for Jesus. And, we will see, their initial names for Jesus are inadequate. They all have some truth in them, but not all the truth. And, I think it's John's way of saying, when we initially come to Jesus, we don't need to have everything right. We just need to come.

- 1. Rabbi:** On the mouths of the first two followers, verse 38, Jesus is called rabbi, which means teacher. In the first century, Rabbi was a title of honor given to the best scribes of the day. And, they typically had groups of followers. And, of course, we've already been told that Jesus is much more than a Rabbi.
- 2. Messiah:** In verse 41, Andrew finds his brother Simon, who becomes follower three.

In doing so, he calls Jesus, “the Messiah, which means Christ.” Now, we don’t know exactly what Andrew is thinking here. Most likely, he is thinking of a political messiah. This is known to be a widely-held view in the 1st century. The Jewish people are looking for a king like David who would free the Jews from Roman occupation. As the Gospel continues, Jesus will correct this faulty view of Messiahship, but for now, this is probably what is in Andrew’s mind.

Let’s move to the next day, verse 43.

III. The Next Two Followers (43-51)

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.”

44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” 46 Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” 47 Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” 48 Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” 49 Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” 50 Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” 51 And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” (ESV)

A. The Call of Philip

We move now to day 4, and we move to the region of Galilee. This time we see Jesus find Philip, and commands Philip to follow him. We learn here that Jesus is on the hunt to find people. He is the “Hound of Heaven,” pursuing and finding and inviting people into his presence. As we learned in the prologue, the initiative to become his follower always lies on the divine side, even if we don’t realize it.

So, who is Philip? He is someone I can relate to, because he is usually mentioned in this Gospel when he is confused, or when he misunderstands Jesus (6:7, 12:21-22; 14:8-9). This suggests that Philip is an ordinary person, that he doesn’t quite get things the first time and that he needs time to understand Jesus. I can relate to that. It’s good to know that Jesus has a place within his followers for ordinary people like him (and me).

B. The Old Testament Witness

Philip then finds Nathanael. Just as Andrew was important in linking to Peter, so Philip is important as a link to Nathanael. And Philip introduces Jesus with another title. Jesus is him of whom Moses and the prophets wrote. In this case, Philip is at least thinking of the Prophet who was to come, promised by Moses in Deuteronomy. But, he may also be thinking more broadly to the fact that the entire Old Testament pointed toward Jesus (especially Isa 11:1; Jer 23:5-6; Zech 3:8). The entire Old Testament witnessed to Jesus.

This reminded me that we give the *Jesus Storybook Bible* to all our children when they are dedicated. The tag-line for this Bible is, "Every story whispers his name." Sally-Lloyd Jones, who wrote this Bible, does such a great job of landing every story in Jesus.

C. The Son of Joseph

Philip continues by calling Jesus, "The son of Joseph." As we know from the other Gospels, this is only half right as Jesus is only the adopted son of Joseph.

It is at this point that Nathanael makes his skeptical statement, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Verse 46. Nazareth is an insignificant place at that time. This is the kind of stuff I love about this Gospel. It's just so real. Two ordinary men talking, and this line comes out. And John keeps it in his Gospel.

Philip responds with our line, "Come and see Nathanael!"

Then, Jesus refers to seeing Nathanael under a fig tree. We're not sure what incident he is referring to, but he gives Nathanael a great compliment. He is a man in whom there is no guile, no deceit. Jesus looked right into Nathanael and saw that he was not a phony. He was a genuine human being. This is significant because Jesus' last words in this text refer to the Jacob story. Jacob was a man of cunning and deceit. Nathanael is just the opposite, an Israelite without deceit. Nathanael is an Israelite in whom there is no Jacob. What a complement! And, Nathanael, struck by this complement, responds with more titles for Jesus.

D. The Son of God and King of Israel

He calls Jesus the Son of God and King of Israel. These two titles are somewhat synonymous, as they both have royal connotations. In fact, in the ancient world, Son of God simply meant kingship. Most likely here, Psalm 2 would have been in mind. In Psalm 2, the kings and the nations are raging and in an uproar against God. God responds that he has enthroned his king on Zion, his holy mountain. He says, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you" (Ps 2:7). His Son is the king enthroned on Zion. This will, of course, get flushed out as we go through the Gospel. Because, what kind of king will Jesus be? Will he be a conquering king who crushes all opponents? It's the model of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, and generally still the model in our world. As we'll see, Jesus will be a different kind of king.

E. The Son of Man

And, now, we come to Jesus' climactic title for himself, verse 51. In Jesus' first remarks about himself, he calls himself "the Son of Man." The first chapter of John contains some 16 names for Jesus, but this one phrase captures best the totality of Jesus' life and ministry. This title puts him in a class all by himself. This title was Jesus' favorite way of referring to himself, over 75 times in the gospels.

The question then is why does Jesus use this mysterious title for himself? It is probably because there are no political or nationalistic associations with this title. No one had ever used this title

to refer to themselves. Therefore, it came with no baggage, and he could then define the title how he wanted it defined.

However, it is a mysterious and enigmatic title to say the least, and there are volumes upon volumes of books written about it. I will share just a glimpse of what I think is likely behind this title.

There are two images from the Old Testament from which Jesus would be drawing.

1. First of all, the phrase occurs in the Psalms to simply refer to a “human being.” So, by Jesus using this name for himself, he is identifying with us in our humanity. He is affirming that he is a real, embodied human being. Along with being fully God as the prologue said, he is fully human. He is a human being, a “son of man.”
2. Secondly, I think Jesus is also drawing from the seventh chapter of the Old Testament book of Daniel, and specifically verses 13-14. As with so much about Jesus’ life and ministry, we get this lowness and this highness. We get absolute humility on the one hand and absolute exaltation on the other. Psalms gave us the humility. Daniel gives us exaltation. And, what is important here is that in almost all of Jesus uses of this title, he uses the definite article “the.” He refers to himself as “*the* Son of Man.”

Daniel 7:13-14 says this:

13 *“I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.*

14 *And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.”* (Dan. 7:13-14, ESV).

How exactly Jesus is relating to this passage is debatable, which is why there are volumes of books written about it. But, it seems to me that Daniel is saying that a day is coming when one like a son of man will be given an everlasting kingdom.

According to Daniel, this son of man is of heavenly origin, but is a human and therefore knows humanity’s plight. (Think John 1:14 and the Word became flesh.) Daniel’s kingdom is cosmic in scale. It includes everything. (Think John’s title for Jesus, “The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the entire cosmos/world” (Jn 1:29)). If you kept reading in Daniel, you would find that this kingdom is communal in nature (7:18), including “the saints of the most high” who acknowledge the authority of this son of

man. (Think followers from our text today.) But also in Daniel, this kingdom is only achieved through suffering. And in the book of John, Jesus will use this term several times in the context of suffering and death (3:14, 8:28, 12:23, 13:31). This son of man, as a representative of mankind, must give his life away for this kingdom (Baldwin, 163-168).

Does Jesus use this phrase to refer to himself because he will fulfill Daniel's vision? I think so. And, no other person in history ever dared use this term for himself! When you put all of that together, it is quite an audacious move to title yourself that way. One writer says, "Son of Man is just about the most pretentious piece of self-description that any man in the ancient Near East could possibly have used" (Johnson, 47).

But, it's only pretentious if it is wrong.

But, if Jesus is right, and he is Daniel's exalted Son of Man who has come down from heaven, been given a cosmic, everlasting kingdom, is worshiped by the saints of God, and receives his kingdom through suffering, then *he* should have all authority in our lives. His Word should be the final Word in his follower's lives. Which means, of course, the culture doesn't have the final word. World leaders do not have the final word. Philosophers and other religious leaders, do not have the final word. This virus does not have the final word. Jesus, the Son of Man, is the final word in his follower's lives because all authority has been given to him as the Son of Man.

And, this is ultimately what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It is to submit every area of our lives to his authority.

And, if you do submit your life to his authority, what will you find? What are you getting yourself into if you come and follow and abide with him? Remember, that was the first question from Andrew and John, the anonymous follower. Well, in our text today, we find two great promises from Jesus: transformation and revelation.

IV. Implications: What Will Followers Find? (42, 51)

A. Transformation (42)

The first promise, transformation, is found in Jesus' interaction with Simon, verse 42. Andrew brings Simon to Jesus and *Jesus looks at Simon and says, "You are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).*

Jesus sees right through Simon and changes his name to Cephas, to Peter. You may know that in that time, names meant a whole lot more than they do now. Names at that time carried connotations of the nature and character of a person, even their whole personality. If you knew someone's name, you knew a lot about that person.

In this case, Jesus says, "You are Simon, the son of John." People aren't exactly sure what the name Simon means, but most likely it's something like "shifting sand."

Jesus says, “Hey Simon, you’re ‘shifting sand’ right now, but you shall be called Cephas, Peter.” And, as you may know, Peter means rock. It’s as if Jesus is looking past the present mess that Simon is, as shifting sand, and out into the future, and sees what Simon will be. Simon, you are shifting sand now. But, just you wait, you shall be Rocky. And, notice Jesus doesn’t say, “Simon, go change yourself” or even “go find yourself.” He says, “You shall be.” He will do it, not Simon. Now, if you know the Gospels, you’ll know that Peter doesn’t seem very rocky throughout the Gospels. But, in Acts and in his letters, you begin to see the transformation. Transformation takes time but it is a promise. You shall be.

If you tuned in this morning seeking to change, Jesus promises that he will transform you. *He* will. Unlike what our culture tells us, it is no use to look inside yourself for transformation. Finding yourself will do you no good. Being found by him is what you need. Transformation will only happen through the power of Jesus. He loves us too much to leave us unchanged. He loves us too much to leave us like we are.

B. Revelation (51)

What else does he promise his followers? Revelation, verse 51. Jesus says to Nathanael, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”*

Jesus’ first invitation was come and see. And, what will his followers see? His followers *“will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”*

Jesus here is drawing on Jacob’s dream from Genesis 28. Jacob, the man full of guile, had camped out at Bethel for the night. And, he learned in a dream that this place was the place of God’s dwelling, the place of God’s revelation. But, that was only a dream.

Here, Jesus is saying, this is reality. If you come, you will see heaven opened. Jesus promises to reveal to his followers heaven opened, for *he* is heaven opened. It turns out that Bethel is not a place. Bethel is a person, Jesus, the Son of Man. He is the complete and decisive revelation of the living God of heaven. The prologue said about Jesus that he would make God known. Jesus confirms it here.

That means if you have tuned in this morning seeking the living God, you will find him in Jesus, for there can be no God talk without him. Any talk of religion or spirituality or spiritual things must be rooted in Jesus. He is God, plus and minus nothing.

V. Conclusion

When we come to Jesus, follow him and abide with him, we have these two great privileges of transformation and revelation. And, that’s only chapter 1! Wait and see what else he has to show us throughout this Gospel.

Amen.

Benediction

Now receive this benediction:

May he open the eyes of your heart this week,
So that you will not be conformed to this world
But transformed - by him - renewing your mind.
As you seek first him and his kingdom and his righteousness.
Amen.

Resources

Baldwin, Joyce, *Daniel (Tyndale OT Commentaries)*

Croasmun, Matthew, *Let Me Ask You a Question*

Lloyd-Jones, Sally, *The Jesus Storybook Bible*

Johnson, Darrel, *Who is Jesus?*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching John (Regent MP3)*

Klink, Edward, *John (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*