

# Rabbi!

## John I:35-42

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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? 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. *John I:38-39*

**W**e often can best understand something by observing its origins. This is true of nations. If you want to grasp the spirit of America, you have to learn about its birth in revolution and its struggle for a workable democracy. The same is true of sports. Football came into existence when Walter Camp took English rugby's virtues of physical strength and courage and modified the rules to include the American virtues of speed, daring, and strategy. These remain the essential ingredients for football success and explain Americans' love for the game.

Likewise, to understand the essence of Christianity, we should examine its origins. This is why John's Gospel takes such care to record the seven days that began Jesus' ministry. We now study the third day, which saw the transfer of disciples from John the Baptist to Jesus. Here at the start we find that to be a Christian is to follow Christ, to witness to him, and to become new men and women in him. In this study we will focus on the first and third of these, leaving the important subject of our witness to Christ for its own study.

### FOLLOWING CHRIST

**A**s John the Evangelist relates the third day of Jesus' ministry, we see the climactic hand-off from John to Jesus. Alexander Maclaren writes, "It was a great historical moment when the last of the Prophets stood face to face with the Fulfillment of all

prophecy... Jewish prophecy sang its swan-song, uttered its last rejoicing, 'Eureka! I have found Him!'"<sup>1</sup> John tells us: "The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus" (Jn. 1:35-37).

Right from the beginning, we see that to be a Christian is to follow Jesus Christ. There is no Christianity apart from a personal relationship with Jesus in which we become his disciples. Christianity is that simple: it is seeing Jesus as the Savior God has sent and going to follow after him. People sometimes speak of a "Christ-less Christianity" – that is, of a Christian experience without a particular relationship to Jesus. But at the very start of John's Gospel we see how impossible this is: to be a Christian is to follow Christ.

So concerned is Jesus with our kind of relationship to him, that when the first disciples came (we are told that one was Andrew and it is generally agreed that the other is the apostle John himself), Jesus demanded, "What are you seeking?" (Jn. 1:38). This is a question that needs to be asked today to would-be Christians. What are you seeking by coming to Jesus Christ?

The possibilities are many. Some people are seeking escape from the hardships of life. They want protection from the trials this world throws at us. But they are likely to be disappointed with Jesus, because following him does not lead us away from trials but often into them. A great example is the time Jesus put his disciples in a boat and sent them out onto the storm-tossed sea. Jesus does not keep us out of the storm, but he does go with us to protect us, silencing the winds and stilling the waves. This is why Christians are not escapists, but are the greatest of all realists; Jesus forces us to be a part of the real world. "You are the salt of the earth," he said (Mt. 5:13), and salt is always mixed in so that it will season and preserve.

Others are mainly interested in wealth, prestige, or power. They are searching for the right kind of career and the lifestyle that will foster success. For some, this may include a certain amount of religion, and they think Jesus can help with that. Or perhaps they have heard the so-called "prosperity gospel" that guarantees riches and worldly

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 10:50-51.

success to those who believe. But such people apparently have not read Jesus' actual teaching. He said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Lk. 9:23-24). It is true that following Jesus leads to spiritual blessing – and that these spiritual blessings are far superior to any material blessings – but Jesus nonetheless does not promise material riches or worldly success to those who follow him.

Others want to be Christians simply to gain peace in their lives. They find that Christianity provides activities and disciplines that are beneficial to a turbulent soul. It is true that Christians find inner peace and joy, but not by seeking after them. Christians find peace and joy by seeking after Jesus, trusting him and living for him. He taught: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Mt. 5:6).

The message of the Bible is that the only way to be happy is to be made right with God – we refer to this as being *justified* – because only then will God receive us into his love and work new life within us. We can only be justified before God by coming to Jesus as the Lamb of God, finding forgiveness through his sacrificial blood and receiving his spotless perfection as our own righteousness before God. This is the Christian message: we must first be justified through faith in Christ as the Lamb of God, and then by following Jesus we will be blessed.

Harry Ironside was an example of this. Raised by a fervent Christian mother, he read the Bible all through childhood and even preached at youth gatherings. But because he had never come to Jesus as a sinner seeking to be saved, he continually drifted into worldly ways. While at a party where many were getting drunk, Ironside remembered Scripture verses condemning sin and realized that he was himself a sinner. Racing home, he opened his Bible to John 3:16, which says that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but will have eternal life. He realized that this meant confessing his need of Jesus' saving blood. It was then that he stopped playing at Christianity and truly came to Jesus. Now he found God's power to turn from sin, and when his friends mocked him for it, Ironside was able to tell them that he

had become a follower of Christ and could no longer live as he formerly had done.<sup>2</sup> We must likewise turn from sin to follow Christ.

“What are you seeking?” Jesus asks. Do you merely want benefits that come from dabbling with religion, or do you want to follow him? To follow Jesus we must confess our sin and believe on Christ for our own salvation. But once we have done that, Jesus broadens the scope of his ministry to include our every spiritual need. Charles Spurgeon expands Jesus question to make it an offer of all the blessings Jesus gives to those who follow him:

Are you seeking pardon? You shall find it in me. Are you seeking peace? I will give you rest. Are you seeking purity? I will take away your sin, a new heart will I give you, and a right spirit will I put within you. What are you seeking? Some solid resting place for your soul upon the earth, and a glorious hope for yourself in heaven? Whatever you seek, it is here.<sup>3</sup>

## TAUGHT BY CHRIST

When we come to Jesus and begin truly to follow him, we enter into a second aspect of Christian discipleship. First, we come seeking forgiveness of sin and salvation with God. But then we begin a lifelong course of study under Jesus’ teaching: “Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, ‘What are you seeking?’ And they said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which means Teacher)” (Jn. 1:38). In ancient Israel, religious teachers gathered disciples who would follow them about – usually walking behind them – serving them and listening to their teaching. Likewise, if we are followers of Christ, then Jesus will be our teacher and we will learn from him.

From the very start of our lives as Christians, it is absolutely essential that we begin to be taught by the Lord. For the first disciples, this meant traveling with Jesus and listening to what he said. For us, it means the study of God’s Word. Jesus said, “For this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth” (Jn. 18:37), and we must learn that truth. The importance of this cannot be over-emphasized. Christians today are as much disciples of Christ as were his first followers. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit to teach us through the Scriptures that he inspired the

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<sup>2</sup> See E. Schuyler English, *H. A. Irons: Ordained of the Lord* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Bros, 1983), 39-49.

<sup>3</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 10:349.

apostles to write (see Jn. 16:13-15). So to learn from Christ today is to learn from the Bible, allowing Jesus to build our faith with his truth.

The most important things Jesus has to teach have to do with himself – who he is and what he has done for our salvation. For instance, John’s Gospel contains a number of famous “I am” sayings that tell us about Jesus. “I am the bread of life,” he says, “whoever comes to me shall not hunger (Jn. 6:35); “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12); and “I am the good shepherd... I lay down my life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:14-15). The most important thing for us to learn is who Jesus is, what he does for us, and what it means to trust and follow him. John stated this as the purpose for this Gospel: “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn. 20:31).

Jesus also teaches us how to live. He presents his own example of humility, faith, mercy, truth, and love for us to follow. Martin Luther explained: “When you have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example, giving yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you.”<sup>4</sup>

By Jesus’ own estimate, it is essential that Christians devote themselves to the study of the Bible. Jesus concluded his great Sermon on the Mount with a parable that made this point:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it." *Matthew 7:24-27*

When we learn and apply the teachings of the Bible, the results are astounding. Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:31-32). As Arthur Pink puts it, Christ’s Word set us “free from ignorance, free from prejudice, free from error, free from the wiles of Satan, free from the power of evil: and if the truth is not ‘known’ then

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Basic Writings of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 107.

such freedom will not be enjoyed.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Jesus said, by devoting ourselves to God’s Word we will become more and more holy. In his prayer on the night of his arrest, Jesus said to the Father, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (Jn. 17:17).

Every Christian can be taught by Jesus through the believing and prayerful study of God’s Word. And we are each called to be disciples – students – of Jesus himself. We are not merely to be taught by our ministers, or to be encouraged by our friends and believing family members, important as those things are. We are personally to learn from Jesus, saying to him, “Rabbi!” (that is, “Teacher!)

and learning from him through his Word. The weakness of Christians today can be directly attributed to our ignorance of the Bible. Judges 2:10 says that Israel went into disarray because “there arose another generation... who did not know the LORD,” and so it is today. Many churches today are famed for their music or their cultural arts or their service ministries – but none of these things can substitute for the vigorous teaching of God’s Word, which God has alone promised to bless for our growth in grace and faith. This is why we are told that the early church “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42), and so must we. Donald Grey Barnhouse explains why: “What is the food that makes our faith strong? The written Word of God. What is the foundation of our hope? The written Word of God. What is the cause of our obedience, and the directive of our action? The written Word of God.”<sup>6</sup> We must individually and together call Jesus “Rabbi!” and follow after him as we are taught by his Word.

## ABIDING WITH CHRIST

There is a third aspect to following Jesus that appears in this account. John 1:39 says that the two disciples encountered Jesus “about the tenth hour,” which was 4:00 p.m. “So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day” (Jn. 1:39). Like many later Christians, the apostle John notes the day and hour of that glorious first time he got to know and spend time with Jesus. The point is that following Jesus involves an intimate personal

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur W. Pink: *The Sovereignty of God*, p. 213

<sup>6</sup> Donald Grey Barnhouse: *Exposition of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 3, *God’s Remedy*, pp. 366, 367.

relationship. John uses here another of his many key terms in this Gospel, saying literally that they *abided* with Jesus (Greek, *meno*). All through John's Gospel we will encounter this word: "Abide in me, and I will abide in you," Jesus says... "Abide in my love" (Jn. 15:4, 10).

Surely, the chief way in which we abide with Christ – spending time with him and nurturing our relationship – is through prayer. No doubt, not only did Jesus teach Andrew and John at their first meeting, but they also shared their hearts with him as well. This is how we relate to God through Christ: he speaks to us through his Word and we speak to him in prayer. If there is an urgent need among Christians today, after our need to be taught by God's Word, it is our need to abide in Christ's presence through prayer.

It is practically impossible to separate true Christian discipleship from prayer. Harry Ironside once went to visit a godly old man who was dying. While listening to the man talk of God, he was amazed at the man's astonishing knowledge of Scripture and grasp of truth. Before long, tears were streaming down Ironside's cheeks and he asked, "Where did you get these things? Can you tell me where I can find a book that will open them up to me? Did you get them in a seminary or college?" The old man replied, "My dear young man, I learned these things on my knees on the mud floor of a little sod cottage in the north of Ireland. There with my Bible open before me, I used to kneel for hours at a time and ask the Spirit of God to reveal Christ to my soul and to open the Word to my heart, and he taught me more on my knees on that mud floor than I ever could have learned in all the seminaries or colleges in the world."<sup>7</sup>

Do you want to be strong in faith? Do you want to know the love of God more deeply? Do you want power for peace and godliness and joy? There are no short-cuts and there is no secret formula, only a life of discipleship with Jesus, trusting his blood for your salvation, learning from his Word, and abiding in his presence through prayer.

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<sup>7</sup> E. Schuyler English, *H.A. Ironside: Ordained of the Lord* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1976), 94.

## NEW MEN AND WOMEN IN CHRIST

If Christianity consists in this kind of discipleship to Christ, then the best remaining question has to do with the result of such a life.

What is the result of following Jesus Christ?

The answer is found in the encounter that concludes this passage. Andrew, having spent the night in fellowship with Jesus, immediately went out the next morning to bring his brother, Simon: “He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas’ (which means Peter)” (Jn. 1:41-42).

It is extremely significant that Jesus changed Simon’s name. One thing it shows is that Jesus had special plans for Simon Peter, namely, that his preaching of the gospel would be the rock on which Jesus would start building the church (cf. Mt. 16:18). It also showed Jesus’ lordly authority over his those who come to follow him, since only a lord has the authority to change someone’s name.

Most importantly, it shows that Jesus intends to make his disciples into new men and women. When we come to Jesus, we see him as our Lamb of God, our Teacher, and our loving Lord. In return, Jesus sees us in terms of what his salvation is going to do in our lives. He sees us as those redeemed by his blood, who, because of his Word and the power of our fellowship with him, are being made new into the likeness of his glory. Jesus sees us – even now in our weakness and continuing sin – as those who will dwell forever with him in glory. Jesus told Simon that he would be named Peter – the Rock – and years later Peter wrote that the same would be true of all believers: “You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into this marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). In Jesus’ eyes, that is what we are, and by naming Simon as Peter he proclaimed what he intends for us all to be.

Michelangelo was once chipping at a huge shapeless piece of rock. Someone asked what he was doing and he replied, “I am releasing the

angel imprisoned in this marble.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus likewise looks at us encased in sinful lifestyles and character, and he sees the work he is going to do to release us from sin and restore God’s image in us. At the very beginning of our discipleship he extends the promise of a new life to all who follow him.

I mentioned John’s famous “I am” statements from Jesus. This is what they are about. Changing the metaphor from sculpting to gardening, Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you... you [will] bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (Jn. 15:5, 8). This is perhaps the most exciting aspect of this passage which narrates the beginning of Christianity: great as it was, it was just the beginning. Jesus had just begun to display his grace and power; John and Andrew and Peter had just begun to learn of him and to feel the effects of his transforming work in their lives.

The same is true for us. If you have never come to Jesus, then you can begin as his disciple right now. In that case, it is my privilege to take up the refrain of John the Baptist: “Behold, the Lamb of God!” Go to him! Only Jesus can make you right with God by his death in your place: you can be forgiven and justified right now by trusting in him. If you do that, you must then begin to follow Jesus, learning of his Word and abiding with him in prayer. And as we walk with him through this life, just as the first disciples did, we experience his transforming power working into us a righteousness, peace, and joy that can only come from heaven. And the best news is that for the most seasoned Christian – for even the most mature and sanctified believer – this is all just the beginning. For our discipleship with Jesus will last forever and ever. Jesus says in the Book of Revelation that to those who persevere in following him: “I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone... And I will give him the morning star” (Rev. 2:17, 28).

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<sup>8</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, ), 90-91.