

Luke 5:1-11; John 21:1-19 (1984 NIV)
The Call to Follow Jesus

Introduction

We often say, “God is good all the time. All the time, God is good.” And we often affirm that with a loud “Amen!”

But can we also often affirm with a loud “Amen!” of this saying, “I follow Jesus all the time. All the time, I follow Jesus?” Well, if we are honest with ourselves, maybe not. We can say, “I follow Jesus sometimes or most times.” But it is difficult to say, “I follow Jesus all the time.”

In our relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ, we cannot presume that our love for Him and our commitment to follow Him will always be the same all the time. It is good that from time to time, we take stock and remember what it means to love Jesus as well as to follow Him. And I want us to take some time to do that today.

First, I want us to look at Luke 5:1-11.

I. Luke 5:1-11

- 1 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God,
- 2 he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets.
- 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.
- 4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”
- 5 Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”
- 6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.
- 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.
- 8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”
- 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken,

10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men."

11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

This passage tells of a major turning point in Peter's life. Jesus met Peter that early morning while he was washing his fishing nets after a night of fishing. Jesus asked Peter to push Him out into the waters in his boat so that He could preach to the crowd.

After the preaching was done, Jesus asked Peter to let down his nets for a catch. You can almost sense the protest in Peter's voice when he said in v. 5: "We've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything ..."

Well, you don't tell professional fishermen like Peter and his friends how to fish. They are experienced enough to know when to continue and when to stop. When Jesus met them, they were very sure that no fish would be caught. But then, Peter went on to say: "But because you say so, I will let down the nets." Perhaps, it was partly out of respect for someone he called "Master", and partly out of a desire to prove that Jesus was wrong.

But what a difference this time. There were many fish; the nets were almost broken; the two boats were almost sunk. The environment was the same, but the result was so different.

Why? Because this time around, it was in the Lord's power and in the Lord's time—the Lord can turn emptiness into fullness in His power and in His time. Some miraculous breakthroughs in life come about because people are willing to just give one more try—but in the Lord's power and in the Lord's time.

We see then Peter and his friends were amazed when they saw the catch of fish. And (surprise! surprise!) Peter went down on his knees. Proud Peter always had an ego problem. But there and then, he saw himself as he really was—a mere man; imperfect; finite; a sinner.

Jesus dealt with Peter that day. He broke the pride in Peter; the pride that led him to believe that he could do his own thing without anyone helping or interfering in his life. So, Peter was ready to do what Jesus wanted him to do—i.e. to be a fisher of men (not just a fisherman).

Peter was willing to leave his familiar ground and comfort zone in fishing; let down everything and followed the Lord. In fact, Peter and his friends believed Jesus enough that morning to obey His call to follow Him; to do what might seem to be very foolish—i.e. to leave their very familiar fishing nets and fishing ground.

Simon Peter let go of his fishing nets (his professional career) because he wanted to follow Jesus' call to be a fisher of men.

Isn't it a relief to know that the Lord doesn't say that if we want to follow Him, all of us must leave our professional careers? However, the call to follow Jesus is still a call to let go some things in life today—e.g. let go of anger, unforgiving spirit, fear, anxiety, security, comfort zone ... What is the Lord asking you to let go today so that you can follow Him with greater and bolder steps of faith and faithfulness?

I now call your attention to another scene—John 21:1-19.

II. John 21:1-19

1 Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way:

2 Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.

3 "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

4 Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

5 He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered.

6 He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

7 Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water.

8 The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.

9 When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught."

11 Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.

12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord.

13 Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

14 This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

16 Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

18 I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."

19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

The earlier account in Luke paints a scenario in the early days of Jesus' public ministry. However, this account in John's Gospel paints a scenario some three years later, at a time after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But there are similarities in these two accounts:

- Same place (Sea of Galilee)
- Same people (Simon Peter and his friends)
- Same time (early in the morning)
- Same problem (no fish)
- Same miracle (Jesus appeared; told them to cast their nets; a huge catch)

It is as if Jesus was getting His disciples to re-experience that event which happened three years ago. Why? I suggest that it is because Jesus wanted to renew the call to follow Him to His disciples (especially Peter) by allowing them to re-experience that same scene.

But unlike the earlier account in Luke, the mood of the disciples in John's account is very different. In Luke's story, they let down everything and followed Jesus with excitement and enthusiasm. But here in John's Gospel, they were very much a defeated and discouraged lot. The past three years with Jesus had been rough and tough—life had not been easy in the Disciples' Training School of Jesus. The top student, Simon Peter, flopped his final year—not once, not twice, but three times.

Another student, Judas Iscariot, failed so badly that he committed suicide. The others also suffered from broken dreams. Some of them were like political

activists—they had looked up to Jesus as their revolutionary leader against the Romans. But Jesus seemed such a poor revolutionary fighter. In fact, He was such a keen lover of peace (e.g. he taught them to turn the other cheek when being slapped on one). So, when they finally saw Jesus crucified on the Cross, their dreams were shattered—what a waste of time!

And so, in defeat and discouragement, one by one, they each returned to do their own things back in their own villages. For Simon Peter, it was back to fishing again. That's where we find Peter and his fisherman-friends in John's account—fishing in the Sea of Galilee. And just like a typical romance story, Jesus appeared to them in that same old place to help them relive and remember their first love for Him.

Indeed, at their lowest point of defeat and discouragement, Jesus appeared to help them re-experience their first love because he wanted to renew His call for these disciples to follow Him. What this implies is that often in life, Jesus renews His call for us to follow Him not at our highest point of victory, but at our lowest point of defeat and discouragement. In spite of all our human failures, Jesus calls to let us know that He still wants us. In spite of all our human weaknesses, Jesus calls to reassure us we can still do great things in His power and in His time.

You notice that it was the Lord's initiative to invite Peter and his friends to have breakfast with Him that early morning—"Come and have breakfast" (John 21:12). In Jewish culture, the best way to show someone that you have fully accepted him is to ask him to eat with you.

The freshness of a new experience is always exciting. You may also remember the excitement you had about Jesus when you first became a Christian.

- You couldn't wait to share Christ with others. What about now? Are you still excited about sharing Christ? Or are you avoiding with all you can to stop others from knowing that you are a Christian?
- You couldn't wait to be in church on Sunday. What about now? Are you still excited about being in church early so that you can be the first one to sit at the front pew? Or are you hoping that all the pews are filled up so that you have a good excuse to go away?
- You couldn't wait to sign up to serve in ministry. What about now? Are you still excited about being the first to volunteer to serve? Or are you trying your very best to play hide-and-seek with your pastor so that he will not even have a chance to ask you to serve?

Let me share a low point in my ministry life. I was then a young pastor. As time went by, I became more and more discouraged. I was at such a low point that God had to deal with me. I remember having to preach at another

church as their camp speaker. It was also at that time when my wife lost our first baby through miscarriage. So, I was really in no mood to preach, and felt like asking to be replaced. But my wife, always a source of support in my difficult times, persuaded me otherwise. So, to the camp I went with my wife.

At the camp, I was to preach the last message in the morning. The pastor of the church asked me to give a time for personal commitment at the end of the message. And as I interacted with the people over the first two days, I was made aware of some specific concerns, and sensed that the Lord wanted me to address them.

So, I asked to be excused from the afternoon activities in order to rework my last sermon. Before retiring to bed, I remember praying something like this to God with my wife beside me: "Lord, you know this preacher needs a fresh touch from you. I have been very discouraged in my ministry. Tomorrow morning, I will be preaching the last message. Use me to bless your people. And in your divine way, indicate to me that you still want me to keep on serving you and ministering to people."

The next day came. At the end of the last message, I gave a call to commitment. I asked those who sensed that God was calling them to make a stand for Him in their Christian witness to stand from where they were. Immediately after this, I closed my eyes and prayed silently for God to work.

I heard some shuffling of feet. Before I closed in prayer, I opened my eyes to take a look at how the people had responded. You guess how many had responded and stood up? Almost the whole camp! But one who was definitely sitting was my wife. She was sitting at one corner ... and she had tears in her eyes. She knew I was seeking an affirmation from the Lord (the others did not know) ... and she could see what the answer was from the Lord for me ... one who was feeling greatly discouraged in his ministry.

So, what did I learn from that experience? It was this—the Lord still wanted to use me even when I was at the lowest point of discouragement. And that's why I am here today at your pulpit—still preaching, still serving, still ministering, and still pressing on.

Perhaps today, after going through some rough and tough times, some of you here may feel discouragement with church, people, yourself, or even God. You may be suffering from broken dreams because things are so different from what you want or expect them to be. Hence, you may be tempted to go your own way and do your own thing. It is often in times like these—at one's lowest point of discouragement—that the Lord is renewing His call for us to follow Him. It is often

in times like these that you and I must ask the Lord to make us both sensitive and responsive to His renewal call.

Note the conversation between Jesus and Peter in John 21:15-17. Jesus asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” Each time, Peter replied, “Lord, you know that I love you.”

The old Peter would have answered: “Lord, of course I love you! I love you to the extent that I will stick with you, I will go to prison with you, and I will even die for you.” In fact, that’s what he promised Jesus in John 13:37 and Luke 22:33.

In view of how Peter had denied Him three times, the Lord now challenged Peter three times to honestly search his heart.

- “Peter, let me ask you this time—‘do you love me?’”

“Yes, I love you.”

- “Peter, let me ask you a second time—‘do you love me? And do you have anything more to promise me?’”

“Yes, I love you. No, I have nothing more to promise you?”

- “Peter, let me ask you a third and final time—‘do you love me? And do you really have nothing more to promise me?’”

“Yes, I love you.” And then Peter added with great grief, “And I am really sorry that I cannot promise you anything more.”

We see here that the Peter now was definitely more honest and less proud; more realistic and less idealistic. He began to weigh carefully what he would say or promise to the Lord.

So, this conversation between Jesus and Peter shows that Peter had become honest and realistic enough to promise the Lord what he could do, not what he could not. You might say that Peter did not promise the Lord the sun, the moon, and the stars. He promised the Lord only his honest best.

And what did the Lord say to Peter when he heard this? He said to him in v. 19: “Follow me.” This is the same call issued to Peter some three years ago in Luke 5:10-11. Yes, the Lord accepted Peter’s commitment not because he had promised the Lord the sun, the moon, and the stars; but because Peter was honest and realistic with his own commitment before the Lord.

In view of your present situation, what honest steps can you take to follow the Lord in this world; to be His disciples; to serve in His church? Give that honest best to the Lord and He will accept it as a starting point. He doesn't want you to promise or to pretend to do that which you really cannot at this point.

On Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter preached and thousands came to believe in Jesus. It was a big fishing catch—Peter fulfilled the Lord's call for him to be a fisher of men. It started with Peter promising the Lord only his honest best in John 21:15-19. On Pentecost, it ended with the Lord using Peter in His power and in His time to bring about a great spiritual catch.

Conclusion

Some things in life are worth remembering. In our relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ, we cannot presume that our love for him and our commitment to follow Him will always be the same. It is good that from time to time, we take stock and remember what it means to love Jesus and to follow Him.

- Remember that the call to follow Jesus is still a call to let go some things in life today.
- Remember that the call to follow Jesus is not to promise Him the sun, the moon, and the stars; but to do our honest best, and trust Him to do the rest.

Let's seek the Lord to help us persevere in His call to us with faith and faithfulness. Amen!