

June 10, 2012

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

If Anyone Serves Me, He Must Follow Me

John 12:12 – 26

What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to follow Jesus? What does that entail? All of us who profess to follow Jesus have some idea of what that means. At the very least there are some basic doctrines and ideas that we have to confess, but following Jesus is much more than confessing a creed. It is that, but it is far more than intellectual assent to a body of beliefs. But the real question is, what did Jesus mean when He called men to follow Him? How did He describe a follower? In this chapter, Jesus makes some of the most staggering and radical comments on what a follower looks like, which, if it came from anyone else's lips we would immediately dismiss them as lunatics. If anyone else said what He said we would say that's too extreme – that's too radical – nobody could do that. But since it is Jesus saying this, we are forced to deal with it. And if we won't deal honestly with it, we really cannot call ourselves followers of Christ.

So what does He say? Well, it is both what He says and what is done in this chapter that give us a picture of what it means to follow Him. As we saw a couple of weeks ago, this chapter begins with a scene in Simon the leper's home where Jesus is having dinner with Simon and also Jesus' friends, Mary and Martha and Lazarus and a whole host of dinner guests and onlookers. And you have to know that John didn't just throw this in as some kind of filler for his story – he had a point in putting this just here. What he is giving us is a living picture that describes what a real follower of Christ looks like.

Into the middle of this feast Mary, the sister of Lazarus comes with a gift for Jesus. It is an alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume and she is intending to anoint Jesus with it. At first, most likely no one is surprised by what they must consider is a rather extravagant gesture – because anointing guests with perfumes was standard practice then. But Mary does something totally unexpected and outrageous. She breaks the alabaster box and pours the contents out on Him. I don't know about you, but it would have to be somebody really special for me to take a year's wages and spend it on them. But that is what she did.

Then she does something even more offensive and startling – she anoints not only His head as Mark tells us, but kneels down and anoints His feet. This was in a time and a place that doing anything with someone's feet was seen as unbelievably disgusting and demeaning. You would never ask anyone to deal with your feet – that would be too humiliating – too demeaning. And then she does something by the standards of that day that was completely scandalous – she lets down her hair. She would have had to. John says that she wiped His feet with her hair. In that day and culture, a woman would never let down her hair in public – that was reserved for the intimacy of the home, not public banquets. And the crowd bellowed at her. And we can imagine that they were at least shouting, 'Where's your sense of propriety – where's your sense of proportion?' And we can also hear Jesus responding. 'Leave her alone – her sense of proportion is just right!'

In other words, Jesus is saying, 'This is what it means to be my follower – this is what it looks like'. And we understand from this that to be a follower of Jesus means at the very least three things: **first** of all it means that **'My commitment to Jesus is not conditioned by cost'**. Real followers are not saying, 'I'll follow you as long as it is not too expensive – I'll follow You as long as it is practical – I'll follow You as long as I don't have to give up too much'. What they are saying is what we sang last Sunday: **'Were the whole realm of nature mine – that were an offering far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.'**

Secondly, the fact that she washed His feet in a time and a culture that said you can't even make slaves deal with your feet meant that she was saying, 'I know that even slaves have rights, but I give them up. I know that there are things that even servants cannot be compelled to do, but I lay down those rights. I give them up – I give up my control – I give up my rights to self-determination. **There is nothing you cannot ask of me'**. And **thirdly**, she was not only saying, 'I will gladly spend everything for You and there is nothing you cannot ask of me', she was saying, 'I am giving You everything I have and complete control of my life and I am giving You everything I am. I'm not just giving You all my stuff and complete reign over my life – **I'm going to delight in giving you everything – I'm going to enjoy giving you control.'**

It is possible to think that you have gone all the way with Jesus. It is possible to say, 'Lord I give you anything you ask for, I give you all my things'. And it is possible to go further and say, 'Not only that, I give up control. I will obey You no matter what You say, or what You send into my life – I will obey You unconditionally'. But there is something you can still hold back. You don't have to like it. You can give up control and you can be obedient and not question it and you can submit and say, 'This is what I owe' – you can do all of that and still hold on to your heart, still not make Him the one that delights your soul. You see, out of all the people there that day, only Mary saw the incredible worth of Jesus, and saw in that moment that to follow Him was worth any sacrifice, any cost, any humiliation – anything.

On December 4, 1857, David Livingstone, who gave his life to serve Christ in the exploration of Africa for the sake of the access of the gospel, spoke to the students at Cambridge University – and this is what he said: ***For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. . .Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice.***

Pastor Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian related a story that one of his professor's at seminary told about two young girls who were in his congregation when he was a pastor. Their hearts had been impacted by the gospel and they decided when they got out of college they would go into missions. They had gotten some medical training and decided they would go and do community health and development in a third world country and help start churches. The parents of these girls came to this minister and said, 'These are just girls, you're an adult. Talk some sense into them. They need to get a job, they need to get a master's degree – they need to get some security'. And the pastor said, 'Let me get this straight – we're all on this little ball of rock called earth, spinning through space at thousands of miles an hour. And if we don't happen to run into anything, or something doesn't run into us, it doesn't really matter, because underneath every single one of us, someday a trap door is going to open and we are going to fall through. And underneath are either the everlasting arms of God – or nothing. And maybe we need a master's degree for a little security'.

Now before you run out of here telling everybody that your pastor doesn't think you need to go to college or that it is pointless to pursue a post-graduate degree – that is not what I am saying at all. What I am saying is 'What is your motive to pursue a college education? What is your motive to get a master's degree?' If your motive is security – you are running after the wrong thing. As Livingstone said, 'All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us.' All the degrees in the world are nothing compared to the value of knowing and following Christ. I am all for getting the best degrees we can – but only so far as those degrees are bent toward the glory of God. You see the alabaster box of perfume that Mary wasted on Jesus, most likely represented her security – that was a precious and valuable family heirloom that could be counted on to help the family endure hardship or famine or the loss of income. And she took that security and poured it out on Jesus. The best and highest use of that perfume was to be spent on Christ.

Listen, to be a Christian, to be a follower of Christ **means that nothing else really matters unless it matters to Him.** We have not been saved just to be forgiven of our sins and go to heaven someday. The gospel is a radically God-centered, Christ-exalting, self-denying message that tells us that nothing we have or own or aspire to in this world is worth anything compared to the worth of Jesus. Followers of Jesus are those who want Him so much that they abandon everything else just to experience Him. Any risk you think you might make is worth the reward. Anything that you might consider dear and costly doesn't even weigh in the balance next to Him. And we don't find ourselves bemoaning the loss because the joy always outweighs the sorrow.

That's what is going on here. And today we continue on to a further explanation of what it means to follow Jesus. ***On the next day the large crowd who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet Him, and began to shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel."*** John 12:12-13. Jesus left Bethany which was on the other side of the Mount of Olives, go up and over that hill and into Jerusalem. Most likely this crowd met Him as He was coming **down the Mount of Olives** – lining the road and waving palm branches and quoting Psalm 118 – the last part of the Jewish Hallel or praise Psalms. And this Psalm was called the 'Conquerer's Psalm which meant that this crowd was seeing Jesus as the conquering Messiah.

The crowd was sure that this was the Messiah – the long awaited deliverer of Israel. The culmination of Jesus' ministry of signs and wonders and proofs of His authenticity was the raising back to life of a man four-days dead and these guys were sure that meant that their Messiah had come. He was going to liberate them from the hated Romans and usher in a new era of peace and prosperity. That's what they thought – so they lined the road and hailed Him as King. And interestingly enough, Jesus doesn't try to talk them out of this idea that He was the King of Israel. But their idea of king and His were not the same. *'Jesus, finding a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt'.* John 12:14-15.

The other gospels tell us that Jesus didn't just happen to find this donkey colt – He arranged for it beforehand with two of His disciples so that it would be waiting for Him when He needed it. His ambition was always to do the Father's will and the Father had decreed seven hundred years earlier through the prophet Zechariah that this would happen: *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.* Zechariah 9:9. And you might think this is a scene of unmitigated joy. The crowds of people – and there were probably thousands, not just a few gawkers. This was the Passover and the population of Jerusalem swelled from a few hundred thousand to over a million during this time, and because the city couldn't hold them all many of them were camped out right around the city, especially on the Mt. of Olives.

But Luke gives us another snapshot of this moment. *'When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it...'* Luke 19:41. The crowds were rejoicing but Jesus was weeping. What a contrast. But only Jesus knew what this meant. Only Jesus knew the cost that was required of Him and only He knew what this crowd's eventual rejection of Him meant: *"If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation."* Luke 19:42-44. Historians tell us that when kings rode donkeys, it meant that they came in peace. And that is exactly what we have here. But what the crowd expected was a conqueror and when a king came as a conqueror he rode a horse. What they didn't understand was that He is returning again and when He does it won't be on the back of a donkey but a horse: *and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war.* Revelation 19:11

And then John tells us: *These things His disciples did not understand at the first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written of Him, and that they had done these things to Him.* John 12:16. No doubt they were caught up as well in the heady atmosphere of Messiah worship that was going on. Imagine it. These guys were from a backwater district called Galilee – kinda like Okies from Muskogee or Newfies from Newfoundland. A region many people despised and looked down on – and suddenly they were in the bright lights of fame and acclamation. The crowd that followed them from Bethany was spreading the fire: *So the people, who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, continued to testify about Him.* John 12:17. And that report brought thousands more to the celebration: *For this reason also the people went and met Him, because they heard that He had performed this sign.* John 12:18. And this is what really forced the Pharisee's hand: *So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him."* John 12:19.

They didn't really want to do anything drastic during the Passover, but they couldn't ignore what was happening. To them it seemed like everyone was joining Jesus and if they didn't stop it right away, they would lose everything. And then John introduces some other players to this party. *Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast; these then came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and began to ask him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came and told Jesus.* John 12:20-22. The word 'see' here, 'We wish to see Jesus...', means to perceive not only with the eyes but with the mind – to become acquainted with by experience. They wanted to know Him, to experience Him – in short, to follow Him. And out of all the thousands of Jews hailing Jesus as King – it was the outsiders, the Gentiles, the Greeks who wanted to see Jesus.

And so it is to these that Jesus gives the explanation of how we can see Him, how we can know Him, how we can follow Him. *And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him. John 12:23-26* Jesus says this is what it means to follow Me – **You have to die in order to live – you have to hate your life to keep it – you have to lose it in order to find it.** Following Jesus is counter-intuitive. What Jesus demands will seem to be to your natural thinking the death of joy, freedom, options and potential. But strangely enough, it is actually the birth of your real joy and freedom and options and potential.

Several years ago there was a man kayaking on a river in early spring in Maine and he came to a place in the river where there was a fairly steep drop over a dam and looking ahead he thought he could make it. But when he went over, his kayak overturned and he found himself under the falls with the incredible power of the river keeping him under. Every time he would make some headway downstream the current would pull him back under this churning whirlpool, and there was a group of people on shore watching this but they couldn't get to him because the current kept pulling him under. Because the water was so cold, he only had minutes to get himself out of this predicament or die of hypothermia, so he fought and fought to break free of the current. But as it turned out, he couldn't get free of the current and he perished. But the minute he died, the current pulled him down to the base of the dam and within five seconds his body popped up ten yards downstream, free from the current where he could have easily made it to shore. The current that he thought would drown him would have saved him. By trying to save himself, he killed himself. The solution to his problem was counter-intuitive. The path to apparent death, was actually the path to life.

The message of the gospel is not 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life'. Jesus never gave that invitation. You never hear Him saying that in the gospels. When Jesus called men to follow Him it was always an uncomfortable and counter-intuitive sort of message. Jesus told His disciples time after time: *"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me."* **Matthew 16:24.** Jesus told the rich young man who wanted to follow Him: *"One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."* **Mark 10:21** In Luke 14 Jesus gives the crowds that are following Him the authentic measure of a true follower: *"If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple."* **Luke 14:26-27.**

In Luke 9, Jesus tells three men what it means to follow Him: *As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father." But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God." Another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."* **Luke 9:57-62.** Become homeless, let someone else bury your dad, don't even say goodbye to your family. Hard words. Uncomfortable words. Even counter-intuitive words. Certainly not 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life'.

So what is Jesus telling us about following Him? What is He pointing to? What He is saying is that there is something so wonderful and priceless and joy-filling about following Him that everything else, every other relationship, every other treasure, every other ambition simply pales in comparison – in fact there are no real comparisons. Jesus is telling us that He is worth everything we can imagine. He is not pointing to the fact that we **lose** everything – He is pointing to the fact that we **gain** everything. *The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.* **Matthew 13:4.** The man who finds the treasure in the field and **with joy**, sells everything he has to buy the field, knows that even if the field costs him everything he has, all he owns, whatever his net worth might be – that is nothing compared to the value of what is in the field. That's why he does it with joy! It is worth the stripping away of all that he has – in fact there is delight in doing it – because the treasure is so valuable.

He says, 'What looks like death to you is really the gateway to life. What looks like losing to you is really winning. What looks like tremendous loss is really incredible gain'. The treasure that pains you to part with is nothing compared to the treasure that comes to you through the gospel. The current you think will drown you will save you if you surrender to its will. So when Jesus says, *If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me*, He is saying, 'If you call yourself a Christian, if you profess to be My follower – this is the path to follow. My path leads to the cross, and it looks like death to your joy, your freedom, your options and your potential. But *'...where I am, there My servant will be also...'* And it is death – death to everything else that falls short of My glory – but it is even more life – life that is full of real joy, true freedom, glorious options and full potential. And this is what the Father honors - *'...if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.'*

Our gracious God and merciful Savior,

Like those Greeks who came to Philip we say we want to see Jesus. Open our eyes to see You – to really see You – to see and know and savor the treasure You are. Let all our other joys and freedoms and ambitions pale into insignificance in the light of Your glory and grace. May our commitment not be conditioned by the cost of following You, and may we find that there is nothing You cannot ask of us. Help us Lord, to live entirely for You, to make You our joy and delight and our everlasting treasure, and may that joy in turn be overflowing in the gospel to all people we pray in the precious, life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.