

**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
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**Becoming Like Jesus**  
**Matthew 4:18-22 (NIV)**

**“As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will make you fishers of men.’ At once they left their nets and followed him.**

**“Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.”**

According to the Barna Research Group, in 2006 there were about 101 million, or 45 % of the population, who claim to be born again Christians in the United States. You can go to their website and find the criteria they used to define born again Christians. (“Born Again Christians,” The Barna Research Group, “Definition”)

In 2007 Barna Research also did a study but this one on evangelical Christian adults. You can find the definition of evangelicals they used on their website. (“Evangelical Christians,” The Barna Research Group, “Definition”)

Based on their definition, there are 18 million evangelical Christian adults in the U. S. or 8% of the U.S. population.

Both of these statistics may sound impressive, but they should also cause us to pause and think. If there are that many born again Christians, and if there are that many evangelical Christians here in the U. S., why do we not see a greater impact on our culture by these large numbers of Christians?

I have been concerned about this question ever since I heard of such polls as this one by Barna and by other polling groups in the ‘80s and ‘90s revealing such large numbers of Christians in the U. S. As I have thought about this, God has shown me over the years that one of the major reasons for the lack of significant impact by such large numbers of Christians in the U. S. is due to the lack of discipleship as defined by what we will see in our passage today where Jesus calls the first disciples in **Matthew 4:18-22**.

The key words from this passage about discipleship are: “Come, follow me.”

To better understand Jesus’ call to His first disciples and what it means concerning discipleship, we need to learn the Jewish background to the passage. I once cited this in a sermon on another topic a few years ago, and today I will cite this same information again since it is crucial to understanding the words, “Come, follow me.” This information comes from Rob Bell’s book, *Velvet Elvis*: “... around six years old many Jewish kids would have gone to school for the first time. It would probably have been held in the local synagogue and taught by the local rabbi. This first level of education was called *Bet Sefer* (which means “House of the Book”) and lasted until the student was about ten years old... The students would begin memorizing the Torah [from Genesis to Deuteronomy] and by the age of ten would generally know the whole thing by heart...

“By age ten, students had begun to sort themselves out. Some would demonstrate natural abilities with the Scriptures and distance themselves from the others. These students went on to the next level of education, which was called *Bet Talmud* (“House of Learning”) and lasted until sometime around the age of fourteen.

“Students who didn’t continue their education would continue learning the family trade. If your family made sandals or wine or were farmers, you would apprentice with your parents and extended family as you learned the family trade in anticipation of carrying it on someday and passing it down to the next generation.

“Meanwhile, the best of the best, continuing their education in *Bet Talmud*, would then memorize the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. By age thirteen or fourteen the top students had the entire Bible [Old Testament] memorized...

“Around the age of fourteen or fifteen, at the end of *Bet Talmud*, only the best of the best of the best were still studying. Most students by now were learning the family business and starting families of their own.

“Those remaining would now apply to a well known rabbi to become one of that rabbi’s *talmidim* (disciples). We often think of a disciple as a student, but being a disciple was far more than just being a student. The goal of a disciple wasn’t just to know what the rabbi knew, but to **be** just like the rabbi.

“This level of education was called *Bet Midrash* (“House of Study”). A student would present himself to a well known rabbi and say, ‘Rabbi, I want to become one of your disciples.’...

“So when this student came to the rabbi and said, ‘I want to follow you,’ the rabbi wanted to know a few things: Can this student do what I do?... Can this kid be like me? Does this kid have what it takes?...

“The rabbi would grill this teenage kid because he wanted to know if this kid could do what he did. The rabbi did not have time to train a kid who wouldn’t ultimately be able to do what he did... If the rabbi decided that this kid did not have what it took (takes), if this student was not the best of the best, then he would send the student home... But if the rabbi believed that this kid did have what it took (takes), he would say, ‘Come, follow me.’

“The student would probably leave his father and mother, leave his synagogue, leave his village and his friends, and devote his life to learning how to do what his rabbi did.

“He would follow the rabbi everywhere. He would learn to apply the oral and written law to situations. He gave up his whole life to be just like his rabbi... This kind of devotion is what it means to be a disciple...

“So at the age of thirty, when a rabbi generally began his public teaching and training of disciples, we find Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee. ‘He saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.’

“Why are they fishermen? Because they aren’t disciples. They weren’t good enough; they didn’t make the cut.

“Jesus calls the not-good-enoughs.

“The story continues: ‘At once they left their nets and followed him.’

“This is strange, isn’t it? Why do they just drop their nets? Why would they quit their jobs for some rabbi they had never met?... Can you imagine what this must have been like – to have a rabbi say, ‘Come, follow me’?... To have a rabbi say, “You can be like me”? Of course you would drop your net. The rabbi believes you can do what he does. He thinks you can be like him.

“Jesus then comes upon James and John, who are fishing with their father, Zebedee. They are apprentices, learning the family business, which in this case happens to be fishing. If they are still with their father, then how old are they? Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen? Twenty?”

“Jesus took some boys who didn’t make the cut and changed the course of human history... If the rabbi calls you to be his disciple, then he believes you can actually be like him... A rabbi would only pick a disciple who he thought could actually do what he was doing... The rabbi [Jesus] thinks we can be like him.” (Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, pp. 124-134)

You see, when Jesus calls us to follow Him, He believes we can become like Him. The whole goal of discipleship is to become like Jesus!

Too often we have exclusively focused on discipleship as learning correct belief or doctrine or memorization of scripture. That was it. It went no further. While these areas are extremely important, they alone do not constitute becoming a disciple of Jesus. They are only a part of it. Discipleship goes far beyond just learning beliefs or doctrines or scripture.

What does it mean to become like Jesus? It means becoming like Him in every way. It means what we believe as Christians about Him, the Bible, God, the Holy Spirit and so on— and what those beliefs mean for us in how we live as Christians. It means becoming like Jesus in our speech, in our attitudes, in our character and conduct. For example, Paul says in **Philippians 2:5**: “**Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus,**” and then talks about the attitude of humility that Jesus had in becoming a human being and dying on the cross.

Too often, we stop at belief or doctrine and go no further. And that is the reason, I believe, we see no corresponding impact on our culture that should reflect the number of Christians living in our country. We need to teach Christians how to live like Jesus would – as citizens, as family members, as employers and employees. We need to teach and model Christian behavior in response to situations when things don’t go our way, or how to handle anger, disagreements, or conflict. We need to be focused on building character even in the small things of life such as cheating on taxes or copying videos or DVDs from video rental places instead of buying the videos or DVDs themselves. We need to be focused on how to make public statements, write letters to the editor, or conduct media interviews where the words, attitudes, and speech reflect and honor Jesus, and are truthful and filled with grace. We need to be focused on discipleship by teaching on passages such as rules for holy living from **Ephesians 4 and 5** or the fruit of the Spirit in **Galatians 5:22-23**, and other passages such that deal with developing Christ-like behavior, character and conduct.

This is hard, because it means all of us have to ask ourselves, “Am I reflecting Jesus in this area of my life?” So it becomes easier just to focus on safe topics such as beliefs and doctrines rather than, for example, issues of Christ-like behavior.

Our staff had a retreat in November specifically to discuss the issue of discipleship. A subgroup was formed to formulate and flesh out what this would mean at SPC. The pastors know what our role will be as do all the ministry directors.

So, beginning today we are introducing discipleship to you. Today’s topic involves what discipleship is – becoming like Jesus. The next four Sundays, Steve, June and I will preach on an overview of the major areas of discipleship: Belief and doctrine and their importance and what they mean for living Christ-like lives. We will preach on having Christ-like attitudes, Christ-like speech, and exhibiting Christ-like character and conduct. After Easter we will share with you the details of the staff’s plan for discipleship for SPC, which will entail future sermons focusing on living lives that are like Jesus, on topics such as humility, grace, compassion, justice, kindness,

etc., etc. There will be Sundays or seasons such as Advent where the sermon series on becoming like Jesus may change for that day or season only, but then we will continue on with the series.

All the ministry units such as children and youth will be teaching on the same topic as the sermon that week or following to reinforce the message and help us develop and grow in this area of Christ-likeness.

There is no curriculum for what we are doing that we know of. We are breaking new ground. The Bible is our only textbook. We need to pray for God's protection of this attempt to restore discipleship back to what Jesus wanted it to be – that He believes we can become like Him. Our staff is very excited about this direction we are taking! It will be a great adventure!

Finally, it is important to see that discipleship is a process. All of us need to know that this is a journey. At times we will fail or miss the mark. When we do so, we need to show ourselves and each other grace.

The disciples didn't become more and more like Jesus overnight. But we do see that even in the three years they were with Him there was evidence of changes in them. A prime example is Peter. He claimed he would not deny Jesus, yet he did. But Peter was transformed after the resurrection of Jesus. He truly became a bold and courageous leader especially in **Acts 5:29**, where he in response to the Pharisees telling him and John not to teach about Jesus, he says, "We must obey God rather than men!"

The Christian church in America is, unfortunately, very focused on end results rather than the process of becoming. Many times we expect perfection. But God doesn't expect perfections. Listen to these words: "Realizing that God is more interested in the process than the product has transformed my walk with Christ because it allows me to concentrate on obedience, not perfection. The goal of perfection only points out how far I have to go, but obedience marks how far I have already come. Perfection frustrates and torments. Obedience releases and makes whole.

"I can't become everything I ought to be overnight. But I can proceed step by step if I'm obedient to what God asks of me today." (Joanna Weaver, *Having a Holy Spirit*, p. 234)

For all of us in becoming like Jesus, we will have our starts and stops, our successes and failures. But just like Jesus did not give up on His first disciples, He won't give up on us because He believes we can become like Him, and He will help us.

And it can happen! Joanna Weaver cites such an example at an airport in Paris. She said: "You couldn't help but notice Jason. A medium-height, stocky young black man, he had a face that glowed with joy. I saw him from across the crowded room while 147 of us waited to see what would become of our flight back to the United States..."

"In a crowd of frustrated, weary travelers—myself included—Jason exuded a peace and a joy that seemed almost inappropriate. After all, we'd just spent eight hours waiting for a flight that was finally canceled. Now we were waiting for word on what our fate would be.

"I watched as the young man helped people with their carry-on luggage. He stepped aside to allow those more aggressive to get farther in line. But it wasn't until we ended up seated next to each other on the bus that would take us to a hotel for the night that I confirmed what I had suspected.

"Jason was a Christian. And, not only that, he was clothed with Christ.

"I've been in Italy for six weeks studying the culture," he told me, "But not knowing the language or any of the other students, I ended up spending most of my time with the Lord. It was incredible!" He laughed. Then he told me about the sweet times he'd spent with his Master... the

songs he'd written...the new passion and vision he was taking home to the ministry with youth he'd established in Mississippi.

"Jason had spent six weeks with Jesus. And, oh, you could tell!" (Joanna Weaver, *Having a Mary Spirit*, p. 226)

Jason was becoming like Jesus!

We, like Jason, should, as Christians, be growing to become like Jesus. It is a process that is ongoing until we reach Heaven itself.

Mark Batterson writes in *Wild Goose Chase*: "I've come to realize that getting where God wants me to go isn't nearly as important as becoming who God wants me to be in the process. And God seems to be far less concerned with where I'm going than with who I'm becoming..."

"As Oswald Chambers said, 'We must never put our dreams of success as God's purpose for us. The question of getting to a particular end is a mere incident. What we call the process, God calls the end. His purpose is that I depend on Him and on His power now. It is the process, not the end, which is glorifying to God.'" (Mark Batterson, *Wild Goose Chase*, pp. 137-138)

Discipleship is a process.

If Jesus can take some guys who didn't make the cut and change the course of human history, then surely he can take us Christians here in America and change our nation – and perhaps the world. For Jesus calls us to discipleship, to be His disciples, because Jesus, "the rabbi believes we can be like him!"

Amen.