

## HOW DO PEOPLE COME TO BE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS?

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John 1:43-51

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I bet you've heard this slogan: "We're looking for a few good men." Who says that? It's the Marines. What's implied in that slogan? Only the best get in. Only the elite will make it. Many are rejected as they're looking for the few good men who have what it takes to be Marines.

Most people in this world think that this slogan would double nicely as God's slogan. He's looking for a few good people. Good people to be his followers. Good people to who will serve him well. Good people to spend eternity with him in heaven. Sometimes that sort of thinking may creep into our minds as well. Thinking of ourselves, we may worry and doubt, "What if God doesn't want me to be his child? Perhaps I have sinned too greatly." And when we think of witnessing to others, perhaps the thought goes through our head, "That's person wouldn't fit in at our church. We don't want 'that kind' at Good Shepherd." In today's sermon, then, we will be answering that all important question: **'How do people come to be followers of Jesus?'**

Our text describes how Jesus called his first disciples. From this story, we learn some truths about how Jesus still calls believers today. We read John 1:43-51.

*"The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."*

In the first couple verses we already see some answers. Jesus left for Galilee. He was in the process of calling men to be his disciples. All together, there would be 12. So far, Jesus had called four. Our text records the calling of the 5th and 6th disciples. We read, "Finding Philip, he said to him, 'Follow me.'" And Philip did.

People throughout history have devised difficult, painful ways to find God. Monks have lived solitary lives. They thought they could find God by denying themselves any earthly pleasures. Others do not go to such extremes. Yet they still insist on fasting, or in keeping certain rules and commands. In doing this, they claim you will find God.

But look at our text. What did Philip do to find Jesus? **Nothing! Jesus found Philip.** And if Jesus found Philip, that implies that Jesus must have been looking for him. When he found him, Jesus didn't give an elaborate speech. And he didn't say, "Philip, to follow me first you must do this, then you must do that. Then you will be good enough to be my disciple." Jesus simply said, "Follow me."

Friends, it's just as simple for us. Some people spend their whole lives searching for God. And yet God said through Isaiah [65:1] *"I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was*

*found by those who did not seek me.*” Many of you came to faith from the time you very young. You weren’t looking for God. He just found you. Some of you who came to faith when you got older, maybe you didn’t set out to find God, but he found you. And there may be some in here who did realize something was lacking in your life and you maybe you did go on a quest seeking God. But even in that case, you weren’t looking for a Savior from sin named Jesus Christ. You knew you were lost, but you didn’t know how to get unlost. God found you too, didn’t he. Through simple things – Word and Sacrament – God reaches out to us. He finds us. He says, to us also, “Follow me.”

Now, how is Jesus’ Word brought to people? How is it that a person hears the voice of Jesus and follows him? Philip and Nathanael in our story had a very unique privilege shared by only a very few people in all the world. They got to hear God’s Word directly from the Word made flesh – Christ Jesus. But how are the vast majority of people led to Jesus? Scripture doesn’t tell us to expect and inner calling from God. Nor a dream where God speaks to us. God does tell us, thought, that he uses those who are already his followers to call others. A day or two earlier, Jesus had called Andrew and Peter, who were from the same town as Philip. Had Philip heard something about Jesus from them or others? I think that’s likely. And when Jesus invited Philip, he followed.

Our text shows an even clearer example of how God uses people to lead others to himself. It says, “*Philip found Nathanael.*” Isn’t it interesting how the same word is used? Jesus found Philip. And Philip found Nathanael. Truth is, Jesus found Nathanael too. He just found him through Philip, didn’t he?

Some people (and I hope this isn’t you) don’t feel it’s their business to tell others about Jesus. They either figure, “Jesus will find a way to call those who are his own. He’s all powerful and he doesn’t really need me.” Or “I’m not really good with words. I know what I believe, but I don’t know how to tell others.” or “There are pastors and missionaries who will do that work! They’ve received special training. I’ll leave this important work to the professionals.” How does Jesus answer this? Who should tell others? Those whom Jesus has called should tell others. In other words, all believers should be leading others to Jesus.

Notice how Philip talked to Nathanael. He didn’t say, “I feel Jesus is the Christ.” or “My life changed when I became a follower of Jesus.” Certainly it isn’t wrong to talk about the change Jesus makes in our lives. And perhaps that will interest some people. But finally, it’s not all about us or how we feel. It’s all about God and what he has accomplished for our salvation through Christ Jesus. So Philip says, “*We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote.*” In other words, he shows Nathanael the proof of Scripture to convince Nathanael that Jesus is the Christ. Wouldn’t we do well to let Scripture do the convincing when we talk about Jesus?

Now sometimes people will doubt when we encourage them to follow Christ. Notice Nathanael’s reaction. He says, “*Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?*” Nathanael doubted at first, didn’t he? There are two explanations for Nathanael’s reaction. Nazareth was a poor agricultural town, with a population of less than 2,000. Perhaps Nathanael doubted that a great leader could come from such a town. But a more likely explanation is that Nathanael knew Old Testament Scripture very well. He knew that there was no reference of the Messiah coming from Nazareth.

Philip's answer is simple. He doesn't argue with Nathanael. He doesn't try to convince him that the Messiah could come from Nazareth. Instead he simply says, "***Come and see.***" He knew that if he only Nathanael would meet Jesus, his doubt would turn to faith.

We also can give such an answer if someone questions us about our faith . We can simply answer, "***Come and see!***" Now they can't see Jesus face to face, but they can meet him in the pages of Scripture.

So someone may question you, "You mean your church teaches only the Bible?" You can answer, "Come and see!" They say, "The Bible says Jesus forgive **all** my sin?" And you can say, "Come and see." They say, "I just trust in Jesus and I get eternal life in heaven?" And you say, "Come and see." You lead them to Scripture where they can see for themselves. You can also lead them to our church. Together we can bring these people to Jesus as we learn about him in Scripture.

Someone once said, "If you want to defend a lion, simply let him out of his cage, and he will defend himself." If you want to defend your faith and your Savior, open the Bible and have them read it. God will defend himself if a person will only read his Word. When people come and see they will hear God's truth. They will hear Scriptures which will make them wise unto salvation.

*But what does God do when people have some doubts -- when their faith isn't immediately strong and certain? Does God reject such people? Look at our text again. "When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, 'Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.' 'How do you know me?' Nathanael asked."* Jesus as true God knows all things. When he greeted Nathanael, he showed him he knew something about his character. Note that Nathanael didn't immediately believe in Jesus. Instead he questioned Jesus! "How do you know me?" he said. Nathanael wanted to know how Jesus knew about him. Had Philip been talking to Jesus about him?

How did Jesus respond to his question? Did he get angry and say, "Oh you of little faith! You are not worthy." Not at all! Jesus saw this man was interested in finding truth. In love, he didn't reject this man. Instead, Jesus encouraged him and brought him to faith. "*Jesus answered, 'I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.'*"

Again, Jesus revealed his divine omniscience. Some commentator take a look at this whole exchange and believe that what Nathanael was doing under that fig tree was reading Scriptures. That assumption certainly fits with the whole conversation, but we don't know for sure that's what he was doing. In any case, Jesus knew what Nathanael was doing. Nathanael saw that Jesus knew things no man could know. Nathanael's reaction was immediate. He said, "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.*"

Nathanael became a follower of Jesus. He believed in him as the Son of God. Jesus reassured Nathanael that his faith would continue to grow. He said, "*You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.*" Then Jesus addressed everyone who was present there, and said, "*I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.*"

With these words, Jesus seems to be recalling a story from the Old Testament. Perhaps it was even the story Nathanael had been reading under the fig tree. In Genesis 28, Jacob saw a vision. Jacob saw a ladder standing on the earth, its top reaching heaven. Angels of God were ascending and descending on this ladder. In connection with this dream, Jacob heard a glorious

blessing from God. The highlight of this message was: “*And in your seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.* [Genesis 28:14b]” In recalling this vision, Jesus is saying that he is the fulfillment of that promise.

Jesus is the contact between earth and heaven. He is the ladder which joins the two. Jesus is the bond of union between God and man. Jesus is the one whose sacrifice reconciles God and man. What greater things would Jesus’ disciples see? They would see Jesus is true God and true Man who would suffer, die and rise again so that man and God could be joined together again.

So what does Jesus do when people meet him, but have doubts? Jesus is *patient*. Jesus *teaches*. Jesus *works faith, and strengthens it*. He promises that as we follow him, we will see great things. Our conviction that he is the world’s Savior and our personal Savior will grow and strengthen. This happens as we know Jesus better and better.

At the beginning of this sermon, we set out to answer the question, “How do people come to be followers of Jesus?” I think we have discovered the comforting answer. Jesus in love looks for us. He seeks us out. He calls out to each of us in his Holy Word. Don’t worry about whether you’re good enough to be Jesus’ follower. He doesn’t call you because you’re good enough. We need to get over ourselves. We have nothing to offer God that he needs. We can’t improve ourselves to a point where he’d be willing to accept us. So how do people come to be his followers? Paul explains to us, [Titus 3:4,5,7] “*But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. . . so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*”

Friends, don’t worry about whether or not Jesus wants you as his follower. Rejoice that he has already found you! Do you still have doubts? Then get to know him better! Come and see! You will see greater things as you learn more and more about Jesus through a study of His Word. That same Jesus who called you will also strengthen you.

Finally, go and do what Philip did. You have met the Savior! You know who he is! You know what he’s done! Go and tell others about the Savior. Encourage them to “come and see” the Savior and his boundless love.

Thank God that he has made us followers of Jesus! Pray that God use us to help many others come to be Jesus followers also. Amen.