



the **Call to Follow**

living the way of Jesus in the world

GOD'S CALL:

Taking the Journey as Individuals

SESSION 3

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OVERVIEW

How does one begin the Christian journey and life in God’s Kingdom? How does one refine and deepen a commitment already made?

When Jesus began his public ministry, he invited individuals with the words “follow me,” and his first disciples dropped what they were doing and followed. Clearly, they did not have a full understanding of what they were getting involved in!

Some years later, once the church had been established, the Apostle Paul instructed that if you “confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” These stories of following and confessing illustrate that both actions and words are required in making a sincere decision to follow Jesus into God’s Kingdom life.

Over the years, the Christian life has been described in a number of terms or phrases – following Jesus, becoming a disciple, being born again, converted, saved, redeemed. Each word or phrase reflects an important dimension of Christian experience. Trends come and go and phrases become more or less popular, but at the heart of the matter is a **transformation** that expresses itself in new priorities, values and behaviour. Whatever the actual words, following Jesus involves sincerely acknowledging one’s sin and separation from God, personal responsibility for the separation, and asking Christ for mercy and help to become a different person with new priorities. It means changing one’s loyalty or allegiance from self to God. It means being “put right” with God, just as he has already been working through Jesus to put the world right.

We must be careful not to oversimplify what is required to follow Jesus. First-time or beginning commitments to Christ can certainly be inspiring and marked by dramatic lifestyle change. However, examples like that of the Apostle Peter reveal that spiritual maturity demands ongoing, costly decisions throughout life.

In the early days of following, Peter was thrilled by Jesus' teaching and miracles. Later on, he would come to realize that following Christ humbly and deeply into the world required more sacrificial decisions – for example, in his need to show generosity to a stranger named Cornelius. Following Jesus as global disciples today similarly calls us to make difficult decisions based on an ever-deepening awareness of our world and a maturing understanding of God's Kingdom requirements.

We cannot take this journey without help. Within days after Jesus physically departed this world, God sent his Holy Spirit to enable believers to live the new life. The presence of Jesus and power of the Holy Spirit are so important that the Apostle Paul later described nine fruit of the Spirit that signal authentic Christian life – love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The need for external signs is essential because it is not unusual for people to become Christians with mixed motives. Jesus anticipated this and made it clear that following him would be costly. He challenged his followers to “take up your cross and follow me” and “lose your life for my sake, and you will find it.” Becoming a Christian is meant to bring fullness and joy, but it also means voluntarily accepting a life of sacrifice and commitment for a purpose other than self-fulfillment. It means following Jesus for the good of others and our world. It means endorsing and working for what God wants to happen in the world, often in the face of opposition and even danger.

While allowing for individual differences of experience, examples of personal conversion in the Bible underscore the need for both words and actions. An example of authentic spiritual change was that experienced by the tax collector Zacchaeus. In conversation with Jesus he offered a public confession of sin (admitting to his greed) and a desire to change his priorities and behaviour (promising to restore what he had stolen from others and extending generosity to the poor). To this Jesus replied that Zacchaeus had experienced salvation. This

amazing change illustrates the Apostle Paul's lovely description: “If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation.”

The need for individual decisions to follow Jesus begins at home. In Western culture we need to recognize the “false gods” that tempt us to embrace consumer-driven lifestyles, shrink the Christian message into keeping a bunch of rules, or turn the Christian faith into a form of self-therapy. When this happens, we become numbed to the needs of our world, and the call to work for God's Kingdom. The early followers of Jesus looked outward, following Jesus into a world with radical generosity. The Apostle Paul spoke candidly about the need to oppose the dominant culture or “patterns” of our world.

A world renewed by the Kingdom of God begins with individuals experiencing new life in Christ because the fault-lines of self-concern and greed run down the centre of each of us – but that is only the beginning. From that birthplace of spiritual renewal we are called to grow into a mature faith that makes a difference in our neighbourhood and world. To do this, we also admit that we cannot live the Christian life in isolation. In our commitment to Jesus, we become part of the “body of Christ.” We can only be effective global disciples with others on the same journey.