

FIRST STEPS WITH JESUS

I have always admired Dr. J. I. Packer. If you don't already know, J.I. Packer was and is one of the most highly respected theologians amongst Bible Believing Christians in our day. His book *Knowing God* sold over a million copies in North America alone.¹ It was formative for Connie and me and for many people in our generation and to this day. When I was a young Pastor starting Christ Community Church, J.I. Packer was like the Chuck Norris of the biblical, spiritual, theological world, only better!

At one point early in our ministry here in Daytona, I was reading another book by him titled, *"Keep in Step with the Spirit."* It occurred to me that there were some questions I had about the Holy Spirit that I would so love to discuss with Dr. Packer. Of course, that seemed impossible. Then one day, I decided just to try. I thought, *"I'll call the institution where he teaches, Regent College in British Columbia and see if it would be appropriate to try to make a phone appointment to get his input."* When I called the administrative office, they said he was at home for that semester, but I could just call him at his house. Here's his number. So I went for it. I called, and a woman answered and said: "Hello, this is Kitty." I knew from having read *Knowing God* about four times that that was his wife. On the flyleaf of his book, it said, *"For Kitty."* I told her what I was doing, and she said, let me get Jim for you. The next thing I knew, I was talking to Dr. Packer. He was cheerful, friendly, open and helpful, and he spoke to me for almost a half an hour. Not only were his thoughts helpful, but his interest in me and the time he gave me were especially encouraging. I remembered that this week as I tried to imagine how the two men in this story must have felt when they approached Jesus and he invited them home to spend time with him. It's a story that can encourage you, not only with the care that Christ has for you but also in the sense that it can move you to take on the life-giving mission of showing that kind of care for others as well.

This weekend we're continuing our new season in the Story of God and the Struggles of Life. Last week I spoke about the four gospels. One thing I didn't get into is the fact that the gospels roughly follow the order or chronology of the life of Jesus but are more interested in developing specific themes from his life. So except when there is a reference to a historical event like the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar in **Luke 3**, or there is a very clear statement like the next day as we have here in **John 1** we are unsure exactly when something happened.

One thing that tells us is that recording a detailed chronology of the life of Christ is not a priority for God. Therefore it probably doesn't matter all that much for us. What is important are the lessons that come through in the life of Jesus. That said, I've called this message "*First Steps With Jesus*" because this story *seems to be* the very first story in the gospels in which Jesus calls certain people to follow him. If you were reading the gospels of Luke or Matthew you would have read very brief sections dealing with the childhood of Jesus. They basically say he had a childhood! He grew and did some remarkable things and did really well in his childhood. Then like Mark and John, they jump into the events that surround his baptism. We will look at his baptism in two weeks. But this weekend, we get an important insight into what is going to follow and how it relates to us, in the second half of **John 1**.

One of the great lessons we learn here at the beginning of His public ministry is that . . .

I. JESUS CHRIST OFFERS US AN UNMATCHED FRIENDSHIP.

Jesus is friendly. In saying Jesus Christ is friendly, I don't want to trivialize him. I want to do justice to what we see here in John. The story starts in **verse 36** and following, with two men standing beside John the Baptist near the river Jordan. Put yourself in the place of these men. These are men who, for lack of a better word, are excited about what is happening. John the Baptist, this daring, eccentric, dynamic fireball of a preacher was preaching that the Lord was coming, and he was preparing the way. Crowds were responding, and then, one day, Jesus walked out of the crowd by the river Jordan and John looked at him, and God spoke to John and John said, *behold the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world*. Now it is the next day, and these two of John's disciples are standing with him when, again, John sees Jesus walking and says, "*Behold, the Lamb of God.*" Immediately the two men left John and began to follow Jesus.

What do they find when they begin to follow Jesus Christ? Well, they find what we still find today. We find that ...

A. Jesus Welcomes Followers.

Jesus says, "*what are you seeking?*" They ask, "*Where are you staying?*" Jesus invites them to come and see.

There is something very significant taking place here. The idea of following Jesus is going to become very important in the gospel of

John. On the one hand, these first disciples are literally following Jesus down some path. But at the same time, they are taking the first steps in a new life of following Jesus as His disciples.

In the same way, the question that Jesus asks is filled with more profound implications: He turns to them in **verse 38** and says: *“What are you seeking?”* Those are the first words out of the mouth of Jesus in the gospel of John. That's a critical question don't you think?

I believe it was Christian Psychologist Larry Crabb who once said that when he asked someone who came to him for counseling, "What do you want?" The man said: "I just want to feel better." He said his response to the man was something like this: "If that's what you want, I suggest you get case of your favorite adult beverage, an affectionate companion and go on a trip to the Bahamas. His point is that until the man wanted something more than just to feel better, he wasn't going to be satisfied with any truly Christian counsel. So here Jesus welcome followers, but he welcomes us first with a question that forces us to clarify and, if necessary, correct our purpose for following Him.

Jesus is saying: "You have stepped out to follow me, but have you thought about what you want? Do you want the truth that will set you free? What are you seeking?" We need to hear in those words the question Christ is asking us. "What are you seeking?" If you want to know Him and learn from His and follow Him you can be sure that He welcomes you. When Jesus asked these first disciples what they wanted, they said: "Where are you staying?" This was an indirect way of saying: We don't just want a passing moment on the path here.... we want to spend time with you... we want to know you and learn from you." That's a start. That is a seed. Things can grow from that.

We are meant to see in Jesus' interactions with these disciples the way he is with us today! He welcomes followers and ...

B. Jesus offers his friendship to everyday people.

These first followers of Christ were everyday people like you and me. Verse 35 simply calls the two men *"two disciples."* Later we are told that one of them was Andrew. The other one is John. ² This was the event that changed John's life, so he remembers and records the very hour that it happened, but out of humility, he does not tell his name. The two disciples are John and Andrew. All of the disciples mentioned in this passage, Peter, Andrew, John, and Philip, are fishermen. Their clothing probably would have fitted with the worn

seats and patched sails of their fishing boats far better than the sophistication of Rome or even Jerusalem. They weren't strategic people, key contacts, or men of influence. They were regular guys in need of God - but that was enough, Jesus says, "come." And these common men begin a relationship with Him.

C. The friendship of Jesus is a gift of grace!

After all, who is Jesus? Well, if you were just to go back over John chapter one, you would discover five things about Jesus.

1. He is God, the eternal creator of all things. **John 1:1-3.**
2. He is *"true light which gives light to every man."* **John 1:9**
3. He is the *Lord* for whom John the Baptist prepared the way. **John 1:23**
4. He is the one whose sandal John the Baptist says he is not worthy to untie. **John 1:27**
5. He is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. **John 1:29**

Whenever you wonder if Almighty God is interested in having true fellowship with you, whenever you think that you have to be some kind of special person, remember these two regular guys leaning over some rough-hewn table and talking with the one who is the true light coming into the world, the Son of God. They sit in the lamplight in some humble home and have fellowship with God – with Jesus. It is not to be disbelieved nor should it be taken for granted!

Here the beginning of his story, Jesus is not only called the Word and the true light that gives light to every man, but also the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The true light will not just shine into the world but will sacrifice himself for his people. People who are broken, flawed, sometimes bitter, often confused, deeply sinful, even despicable. Our sins separate us from God, but on the cross, Christ paid the penalty for our sins and reconciled us to God. Reconciliation is a word that has to do with relationships. When we admit that our sins have separated us from God and turn to Christ trusting in Him as our Savior we are forgiven and reconciled to God. *Friendship with God is possible because of the work of the cross.* You step out of indifference and estrangement and into friendship with you turn and trust in Christ.

D. Jesus Christ invites us into friendship with him today!

Jesus said that after His death and resurrection He would come to every believer and live in us by His Holy Spirit. In **John 16:7** Jesus said it was to our advantage that He leave us physically so that He could come to us spiritually and live in us intimately by His Spirit.

If there is anything Jesus shows us in a day spent with these two disciples it is that He is friendly. He welcomes those who want to follow Him! The second great lesson in this passage is that not only is Jesus friendly but ...

II. THE FRIENDSHIP OF CHRIST CHANGES LIVES.

You see that in the second incident which begins in **verse 40** where we read *One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ). 42 He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).*

A. When Jesus Looks At You He Sees The Truth About You.

As Jesus looks at Simon He says; *"you are Simon the son of John."* Now that simple statement was really diagnosis of his personality. It was a way of saying *"you are a rash impulsive man."* Names are very important and often symbolic in the Bible. The name Simon is just a form of the Old Testament name Simeon. (In **Acts 15;14** the Apostle James calls Peter *Simeon*.) Simeon was famous in Old Testament history. He was the 2nd oldest son of Jacob. Simeon was the one who along with his brother Levi ruthlessly avenged an offense against his sister by destroying a whole town and killing many innocent men. The rash impulsive character of Simeon was mirrored in Simon whose character in all the gospels reflects the same impulsive instability.

Jesus saw all of this in Simon. He knows all about who we are. But the encouraging thing is that ...

B. Jesus Also Sees In You The Person You Can Become .

He says, *"You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter). Cephas is the Aramaic word which like the Greek word Peter means "rock". Jesus is saying, "You really are a Simon, rash and impulsive, but you shall become a rock of stability and loyalty." When God looks at you He looks beneath the surface to see the person he intends for you to become and will make you by grace.*

The love of Jesus is not simply a miracle of divine will power but a way of seeing - a way of looking at people. We tend to look at a prodigal son as an ungrateful delinquent who wasted his father's money and his own health on prostitutes and parties. Jesus sees him as a lost son greatly loved by his father who constantly waits for him despite all his confusion and sin. When Jesus calls us to follow Him He calls us to learn to look at people differently -- to look at an unfair friend, a mean employer and see the person beneath the surface - the person loved by God, the person God wants to make that individual as he grows them in this life and transform them in eternity.

What we are reminded of here is that Jesus already sees now what we will be! If you have committed your life to him then, yes, He knows your sin and shame but He also knows your gracious destiny. If the thought that Christ sees all your past sins and present weaknesses ever discourages you remember this; He also sees all the growth you will experience and even the glorification that will one day be yours by His grace because of his death and resurrection.

Christ sees us the way we are and the way we will be and with that...

C. Jesus gives us a new role to play in life.

Look at **verses 43-46** *The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." 46 Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."*

There is a pattern here and a parallel between what Jesus does and what those who follow him do. Jesus finds Andrew and Andrew finds his brother Peter. The Jesus finds Philip and Philip finds his friend Nathaniel. The same words that describe what Jesus did in **verse 43** are used to describe what Philip did in **verses 45-46**. They both *found someone* and *said something*. In **verse 43** Jesus found Philip and said, *"follow me"*. In **verses 45 and 46** Philip found Nathaniel and said; *"come and see."* Walking with Christ is reaching out with Christ, to others, to invite them, with us to follow Him.

One study I came across asked over 14,000 believing Christians the question *"What or who was responsible for your coming to Christ and*

your church?" Over seventy-five percent said it was through the influence of someone they knew who invited them or shared the gospel with them. The great majority of people today who are walking with Christ can trace their "spiritual roots" directly to a friend or a relative.

There is an aspect of walking with Jesus that we can't achieve if we refuse to share one of the great burdens of His heart; that is His desire to see others come to know Him also. On the other hand when we share His love for others who are not following him - when we pray for and develop relationships with them and seek to live like Christians before them - when we look for opportunities to speak to them about Christ, or to invite them to church, then that Christ-like concern for others breathes new life into our relationship with him and our sense of the presence and the power of Christ in us!

Conclusion

It is a humbling and faith-stretching thing to actually believe that God wants to live in relationship with you. That God came into our world and became one of us in order to restore to us a relationship with him. That Jesus by his Holy Spirit lives in and has true friendship with broken, sometimes bitter, often shallow and demonstrably sinful people like all of you, and also me. But that is what the prophets and poets of Scripture tell us and that is what this story about Jesus shows us. So believe this. Jesus initiates relationship with you, he sees you, not just as you are now but as you will one day be because of his love and sacrifice for you, and he calls you to walk this earth in fellowship with him and tell others what you have found in him.

Amen

Confession

Almighty God, Forgive the cynical unbelief that allows us to act as if you do not deeply care for people like us. You have clearly shown us, through Jesus, that you do. Forgive the willful nearsightedness that only sees what we have been and fails to believe what you have promised us we shall become in Christ. Help us to see ourselves, and others as you see us. And, Lord forgive also the fearful self-centeredness that is so slow to invite others to come and see what we have found in our Lord and Savior Jesus. Amen

Assurance

John 3:16-17 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Acts 13:38-39 Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹ and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowing_God

² Throughout the gospel of John, John never uses his own name. Perhaps it was a way of showing humility. When John speaks of himself, he just says, "a disciple," or the disciple that Jesus loved." John calls all the other disciples by name. If it had been any other disciple, he would have gone on to name him as he did Andrew and all the others.