

Series: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

Sermon: *Follow Jesus: Turn your lives around and turn the world upside down!*

Scripture: Matthew 4:12-13, 17-22

Speaker: Josh Black

Greeting:

Good Morning! My name is Josh Black and I am the Pastor of Student Ministries here at First Free. I would like to direct your attention to the announcement in the bulletin regarding the Family Life *Weekend to Remember*. I would like to encourage all of the married couples here this morning to consider attending this conference. There are brochures for this seminar available in the courtyard and attached to the back of those brochures you will find a sticker with some helpful financial information. My wife Maggie and I will be attending the conference that weekend and would like to invite you all to join us.

Also, please note that my sermon outline in the bulletin was completed before my sermon was completed and therefore may not follow my teaching in order.

Introduction:

I ran across an interesting study a few years ago, when I was working with Young Life. There was a man who had set out to discover what being one of the 12 disciples of Jesus would have been like. So, in an effort to reproduce this experience, he decided he would listen to the Gospels on audio tape every day. His regimen was to listen to the whole of one Gospel book every day for a month. So he would listen to Matthew in its entirety 30 times a month, then he'd move on to Mark and listen to it for a month and so on. He repeated this exact pattern for 2.5 years – listening to each of the Gospels about 225 times. At the end of his study he came to many conclusions, but the most profound thing he discovered was how many times the phrase ‘follow me’ occurred in the Gospels. He observed that the phrase ‘follow me’ occurred at least 78 times in the gospels, where as the phrase ‘born again’ was only found once.

I came from a background where being ‘born again’ was the desired goal in all of ministry and so this study really peaked my own curiosity. I have remained fascinated with this study ever since. The youth ministry staff and I here at First Free have recently revised our mission statement to read ‘*Making Followers of Jesus for a Lifetime.*’

This change was motivated by a more recent study that shows that more than half of the teenagers raised in Evangelical homes will leave the church after the age 18 ‘never to return.’ Could it be that many of these students are not ‘followers of Jesus?’ There is a big difference between *believing* in Jesus with your head and heart and *following* Jesus with your life. My staff and I have spent a considerable amount of time trying to define what it means to be a follower of Jesus and how to work along side of families to see that students become ‘followers of Jesus for a lifetime.’

But before we look at the text in Matthew I would like to look briefly at some of the historical backdrop to our text.

Narrative/Background:

Herod: The Greatest Builder in Jewish History.

Herod the Great was the ruler of Palestine when Jesus was born and his influence on leadership remained present when Jesus began his earthly ministry. In looking at how Jesus lived in Herod's world, I hope to be able to show how we should live in our world today.

Like all powerful leaders, Herod the Great wanted to leave his mark on first century Palestine. And Herod accomplished that goal. He was the most notorious leader of his day.

As Christians, we think of Herod as the jealous King that killed babies in Bethlehem. But Herod was also a great builder. Herod must have been a big dreamer, a think he must have been a goal setter and I'm confident he was a big egomaniac. To illustrate what Jesus' world was like we will first consider Herod's own palace, Herodion, and then Sepphoris, the city Herod's son Antipas' rebuilt.

The Herodion

The Herodion, was the third largest palace of its day, it was built in the wilderness near Bethlehem...Its buildings covered forty-five acres of land and were surrounded by nearly two hundred acres of palace grounds.

This is a great picture of Herod's power and illustrative of his leadership in 1st century Palestine. This structure stands in stark contrast to the cave, or stable, that Jesus was born in. Herodion was only 3 miles from Bethlehem. <http://followtherabbi.com> has constructed a diagram that shows the humble birth site of Jesus, in the shadow of the towering Herodion in the distance.

Do you realize that the Herodion, despite its size and beauty and nearness to Bethlehem, is never even mentioned in the NT? Could it be that Jesus never even visited it?

If you will open your Bibles now to the book of Matthew and turn to the fourth chapter; we will begin reading in verse 12 which picks up the account of Jesus' life, following his baptism and temptation.

Matthew 4:12-13

“When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali”

Now right before Jesus begins his earthly ministry he is living in Nazareth where he grew up. And the text tells us that John has been put in prison. This is Jesus' cue; it is time for Jesus to begin his earthly ministry. But why does he move to Capernaum? As I mentioned before – Bethlehem was 3 miles from Herodion. An interesting coincidence is that 3 miles from Nazareth was a town that Herod's son Antipas had rebuilt called Sepphoris. It is in ruins now, but during Jesus day it was a flourishing city.

Sepphoris

Sepphoris was actually the Capital of Galilee! ... *Sepphoris was home to one of the largest theaters of the first century. The city was laid out in the latest Roman pattern with a colonnaded street leading to the forum. It also featured a citadel, a gymnasium, an elaborate water system, and probably a bathing complex.*¹

Now if Jesus does most of his ministry in Galilee, why is there not so much as a mention of Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee, in the Bible?

Jesus walks right past it all. Jesus lives his life as though Herod's world never existed² Jesus doesn't seem interested in the government, entertainment, athletics, architecture; the pomp and power of Sepphoris. He walks right past all of this and on into Capernaum; an insignificant small town on the northeast corner of the Sea of Galilee. Why did he walk past Sepphoris?

Was it because Jesus didn't believe in 'thinking big'?

Did Jesus not have big dreams; did he have any goals or big plans?

Did he have a 'mission statement' posted on the wall of his office in Nazareth (or did he leave it in the file cabinet like so many companies today do)?

I believe he did have a mission. But his goals and methods were very different from that of world he lived in – and much more effective.

Please note: Herodion and Sepphoris today are ruins – the Church of Jesus Christ is alive!

So what was Jesus' mission statement? What were Jesus' goals? And how did he plan to accomplish it all?

Herod's goals seem plain to me.

To rule all of 1st Century Palestine

Jesus goals are maybe not so plain, so let us resume our reading in Matthew 4 at verse 17.

Matthew 4:17

'From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'

“When Jesus speaks in terms of Kingdom he is speaking in the largest and most comprehensive terms available to him.”³

What were Jesus' goals? To rule the *entire* world and be worshipped by all creation, for *all of history* past, present and future and to rule your entire life as well!

So if Jesus is Kingdom focused why did he choose the small town of Capernaum, on Sea of Galilee, as the place to begin his ministry and call his disciples?

Capernaum was:

- A haven for orthodox Jews
- There was no theater, no citadel, no capital, no economic wealth like Sepphoris
- The people valued community, synagogue, Torah - Scripture
- It was a small, rural, Jewish community; full of simple people
- Capernaum was also the home of some of the most renowned Rabbis in Israel.
- And education was central to the life of Orthodox Jews.

Education:

These Jews would have looked up to their Rabbis. The ultimate goal of education in these communities would have been to become a disciple of a Rabbi. But becoming a disciple is not an easy task.

Their education was very rigorous.

1. From the age of 6 to the age of 10 the goal of education would have been to memorize the entire Torah by heart. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – memorized! If a student did well during these years of education and showed promise they may move up to the 2nd level of education
2. It would begin around age 11. The goal here would be to memorize the rest of the OT, and thoroughly understand the theology found in the OT. If you didn't make the cut at this stage of education you would begin working in the family trade or business. Only the best of the best moved on to the 3rd stage of education.
3. This last level of education was called discipleship. A student good enough for this level of education would seek out the Rabbi of their choice and apply to an apprenticeship of sorts. The ultimate goal of discipleship was to learn everything the Rabbi knew and to become just like the Rabbi.

If the Rabbi thought the applying student could achieve this goal of discipleship then the student would enter into a discipleship relationship with the Rabbi. The disciple would then leave his family, and occupation (if he had one), and would devote the next 10-15 years of his life to continual association with the Rabbi. And the disciple would hope to become a Rabbi himself at the end of the apprenticeship.

This idea of discipleship was not a concept that Jesus introduced to the Jews. When he calls the disciples to follow him, they would have understood the significance of the call. ^{4,5}

This is the historical backdrop for our main text this morning.

Please turn now in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 4 beginning in verse 18 or follow along on the screens.

Matthew 4:18-22

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.

You may not know a lot about the history of 1st century Palestine, but I would venture to say that most of you have heard this story and you know that these 4 men were used by Jesus to change the entire course of history, forever– **to turn the world upside down!**

And how did Jesus do it? I want to draw 4 conclusions from our text this morning.

These points are not found in your bulletin and will not be on the screen, however, they will be posted on the internet later this week if you are interested.

They go as follows.

Proposition/Division: Follow Jesus – Turn your life around and turn the world upside down!

- 1.** Although it is only through Jesus’ power that the world is changed, he calls us, ordinary *people* like you and me, to build his extraordinary kingdom!
- 2.** Our part is simply to respond to Jesus’ *call to discipleship* through true repentance - turning completely away from ourselves (and our kingdom) and towards Jesus and his kingdom.
- 3.** Repentance is proved by obedient lives that are wholly devoted to God, not by heads and/or hearts that merely believe in God.
- 4.** The life of discipleship and the ministry of making disciples is Jesus’ way of expanding his Kingdom

Confirmation:

1. Matthew 4:18-19

Let’s look a little closer at these 4 young men Jesus would use to turn the world upside down. Matthew points out that these men were fishermen for a reason. These young men were likely teenagers⁶ and if they were fishermen in their parents’ business then they were not following a Rabbi. And if they were not following a Rabbi what does that tell us about these young men? Could it be that they hadn’t made the cut in their education? Could it be that they weren’t good enough? Not good enough for Herod’s world; not a part of the upper echelon in the community at Capernaum either?

Do you ever feel like you’re not good enough to serve in the Kingdom of God?

I believe that these men would have understood what it took to become a disciple and that when Jesus called them to follow him that they would have understood that he intended for them *to be His* disciples. These young men were not good enough to make it in the educational and religious setting of their day, but now Jesus, the great Rabbi, calls these B teamers; the scrubs, to become his disciples. Jesus doesn't seem concerned with their credentials; only their obedience.

He is in essence saying, “you can be like me, you can do what I do – follow me.” What encouragement! What significance he brings to their lives. Can you imagine what the disciples must have been thinking? “Me?” “You want me, a fisherman; a flunky, to be a disciple of you the Great Rabbi – Jesus?”

Remember, that in the Jewish educational structure that the disciple would seek out the Rabbi. But in this case Jesus seeks out the disciples. Jesus says, in

John 15:16,

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.”

Jesus didn't build a huge palace or theater to attract a bunch of people to himself. Jesus wasn't into big events. Jesus was the big event. Jesus touched individual lives; the lives of the outcasts; my life – your life! Jesus is no respecter of persons. He can do extraordinary things through very ordinary people. But he does the work; not us.

It is not about us. It's all out Jesus. But Jesus does call us to respond to him. He requires obedience. Before we explore our role as obedient followers of Christ I want to draw your attention to a potential discrepancy between Matthew and John's account of Jesus calling the first disciples. I hope this will help us understand discipleship better.

2a. Matthew 4:12

In Matthew's account John the Baptist has been arrested and he is not around when the first disciples are called by Jesus. However, in John's Gospel John the Baptist is the one who actually introduces the first disciples to Jesus.

I do not find that there is a contradiction or discrepancy here. These are not two accounts of the same event. These are two entirely different events.

These two men, along with a few others, were introduced to Jesus, by John the Baptist. However, they did not enter into a discipleship relationship with Jesus at that moment. It was not until after John the Baptist had been put in prison and Jesus took up permanent residence in Capernaum that Jesus presented the formal 'call' of discipleship to these four men.^{7,8}

It is essential that we understand that there is a clear distinction here between belief in Jesus and following Jesus. When John the Baptist introduces the disciples to Jesus they believe in Him at that point. But believing Jesus was who he said he was is not the same thing as leaving your old life behind

and following Him. Please understand that although you cannot follow Jesus without first *believing* in Him, you can *'believe'* in Jesus without being a *follower of Him*.

2b. Matthew 4:17

In verse 17 our text tells us that Jesus message was *'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'*

I believe there may be some confusion today concerning the definition of Repentance.

Repentance is not simply being sorry for your sins and believing Jesus is the Savior. Repentance is turning completely away from your current life (and your kingdom where you sit on the throne) and towards Jesus and his kingdom where he rules the universe as well as your life.

Belief in God, if it is sincere, will inevitably change your entire *outlook* on life and your *outlook* on the world you live in, but *following Jesus* will ultimately change your actual life *and* how you live it.

Story

I personally came to faith when I was 12 years old. However, I was continually frustrated over the next 10 years as what I believed and how I lived were two very different things.

At the age of 21, I was really wrestling with a passage in Hebrews 6 that said, 'if you fall away it is impossible to be brought back to repentance.' I felt that this passage was talking about me and that I was in danger of 'losing my religion.' As I prayed and talked through this passage with trusted friends I felt like God was speaking to me and saying, "Josh, why are you so wrapped up with questions of belief and salvation and simply put your faith into action? - 'Follow me!'"

I was a college student at the time and one night over Christmas break this all came to a head. I made a commitment to God that night that I would take my faith beyond my belief and that I would become a follower of Christ. I don't claim to have lived a great life every day since then and I do not propose to you that the disciples did either. What I do know is that when our lives are 'me' focused we will continue to hit a dead end. And when our lives are centered and focused on Christ then we have the opportunity to allow him to change us and those around us.

I think this point is further illustrated as we look at the rest of this passage.

3. Matthew 20-22

The text tells us, beginning in verse 20, that upon hearing the call of Jesus to 'follow' him that the disciples *immediately* left their nets; they also left their boats – this was their means of making a living. James and John left their father, too. It seems to me that Verse 17 *introduces* us to discipleship – "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" – but these verses put flesh on what discipleship really is and what it means to follow.

Some of you may be familiar with the story of the mercenaries who fought alongside the Christians during the Crusades. In order to be a part of the Christian army they first had to be baptized. But

when they were being baptized they would hold their sword out of the water. In essence they were saying, “you can have my soul, but you can’t have my sword!”

Discipleship holds nothing out of the water. God says, ‘if you want to be great you have to surrender your whole life to me; not just part of it.’

I want your job, I want your family (your marriage, your kids), I want all of your relationships, I want your education, I want your checkbook, I want your time, talents, resources, I want your thought life; I want all of you!

The great paradox of the Christian life is that we are called to give up everything in order to gain everything. And Jesus is our perfect model. He gave up his life in order to restore life to his whole creation. If we are to fulfill the goal of discipleship we are to then become just like Jesus and to do just what Jesus does. We give everything we have in order to gain everything he has.

So how do we practically ‘follow Jesus?’

How do we respond to the ‘call’ of discipleship?

Or as the question in your outline asks, “Are you a responsible Christian?”

A lot of the popular self-help literature available to us today defines Responsibility in terms of the human choice and will. They tell us that we are autonomous beings that have the *Ability to Choose* our *Response* to any situation – hence the term Response-Able. They say that our success therefore will be determined by how much we exercise this faculty of the human will.

I feel that although this may sound good on the surface it is only partial truth.

Only Jesus has the *Ability* – not us.

All we have is our *Response* to the call. We are called to surrender and to obey.

As the hymn says ‘He is able, more than able.’ But in order to experience Jesus’ victory in our lives we have to respond.

Keep in mind that it was the very Word of God that called the disciples. The same Word of God that spoke creation into existence. There is power in the Word. But we have to listen to the Word if we are to respond to the Word and how can we listen to the Word if we don’t read the Word?

We are to follow. This idea of following implies a continual relationship. How can we be in relationship with Jesus if we don’t talk to him? And how can we talk to Jesus if we don’t pray?

4. The Great Commission

This is what it means to be a disciple: turn your life around – direct your whole life to Jesus. And this is what Jesus means when he says he’ll make you *fishers of men* – I will turn the world upside down through you. In the Great Commission Jesus calls us to make disciples of all nations. He calls us to be like him and do what he did – make disciples. This is the way of Jesus and it’s in direct opposition to the way of the world, which values things over people.

I'm convinced that if we would simply turn our lives towards Jesus daily, and then pour our lives into the lives of the people around us (starting with our own families), that more people would come to know and follow Jesus than any outreach event we could ever dream up.

On the other hand our witness is ruined when what we believe and how we live are out of line.

Digression:

I am so excited to celebrate with you all this evening the elimination of our building debt, the faithful giving of this church and to dream big dreams for the future of the Church. But I will confess to you that I am scared that Satan may use a great blessing like this to distract us.

Conclusion/Exhortation:

You can climb a ladder with passion, but if at the top of the ladder you realize that you had it up against the wrong wall all along then your climbing may be in vain. I want to challenge us as a congregation to dream big dreams for this church and for our own lives, but to not adopt Herod's ways of building. We need to put as much, if not more, time and energy into plans for expansion in discipleship as we do into expanding our facilities and ministries that support discipleship.

Who holds the blueprints to the building project in your life?

Let us be known as followers of Jesus who were faithful and obedient and who ignored the methods and goals of the world and instead adopted God's goals of Kingdom building. Let us build into the lives of people and not ever become distracted by the building of things!

Remember that Jesus chose very ordinary people to build his Kingdom. Herod died a failure and remnants of his dominion lie in ruins today; Jesus changed eternity! Regardless of what you think of yourself God has the ability to transform your life. Jesus Kingdom will never be in ruins and He will not leave your life in ruins either! All you have to do is respond to his call – let him be the great King and the great builder in your life.

For as **Philippians 1:6** says, "*...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*"

Would you pray with me?

Prayer:

Lord, give us strength and encourage us. Call us out of our comfortable lives and into discipleship. Let us experience life to the fullest as we trust you, follow you and honor you with our whole life.

May your Kingdom come, may your will be done – in our lives!
To God be the glory – through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN

¹ibid

²Peterson, Eugene, Follow the Leader: Herod, DVD, Regent Video, 2000

³ibid

⁴Bell, Rob, Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith, Zondervan, 2005

⁵Vander Laan, Ray, That The World May Know: Dust, Faith Lessons, DVD, Zondervan, 2004

⁶<http://www.followtherabbi.com>

⁷Bruce, A.B., The Training of the Twelve, 1894, Kregel

⁸Chrysostom, John, Homilies on St. Matthew