

FOLLOWING MEANS...

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ January 24, 2016

¹⁹ So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. ²⁰ Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. “Let me kiss my father and mother good-by,” he said, “and then I will come with you.” “Go back,” Elijah replied. “What have I done to you?” ²¹ So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant. (1 Kings 19:19-21)

This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

FOLLOWING MEANS...what? I’m sure you could ask that question to 20 different people, and get 20 different answers as to what FOLLOWING MEANS. I can just imagine how a few different Bible characters would finish that sentence. Adam and Eve might say FOLLOWING MEANS not eating the forbidden fruit. Abraham might say FOLLOWING MEANS leaving behind my family. Peter might say FOLLOWING MEANS being a fisher of men. The rich young ruler might say FOLLOWING MEANS giving up all of my possessions.

When you think about the phrase “FOLLOWING MEANS...” you could probably come up with something as well. Maybe FOLLOWING MEANS listening to your parents. Maybe FOLLOWING MEANS doing what your wife or husband wants you to do. Maybe FOLLOWING MEANS supporting your favorite sports team through thick and thin, through wins and losses.

This morning, the focal point of our service through our lessons and songs has been about following. I’m sure it doesn’t come as a surprise to you that being a Christian means FOLLOWING Christ. But this morning I don’t want to focus on what you already know, but I want dig deeper and ask the question of what does it mean to follow Christ? What will that look like in your life? Are you willing to make the changes necessary to not just say that you follow Christ, but to actually follow him?

Through the account of Elijah and Elisha we see what FOLLOWING MEANS, both in the life of Elisha, and also in our own personal lives. FOLLOWING MEANS...

1. A willingness to leave behind
2. A willingness to look forward

(1)

What we have before us is the account of Elijah calling Elisha to be his successor. But there was a lot more going on that helps to add detail to this story. One of the more familiar accounts in the life of Elijah was when he had a sacrifice battle against the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. The

land of Israel had been overrun with people following false gods, the more popular of which was a fertility god named Baal. Instead of worshiping the Lord, the God of Israel, many Israelites worshiped Baal or some other deity, this included the queen of Israel, a wicked woman named Jezebel.

As a result of Israel's wickedness, God closed up the heavens and didn't allow it to rain for three years. This was an indictment against the god of fertile crops. Of course, Jezebel convinced many of the people that this was Elijah's fault, and still sought to kill him. But eventually, the Lord called for a standoff. The Lord against Baal, the Lord's prophet - Elijah, against Baal's prophets. And so on Mt. Carmel the competition began - Elijah vs. 300 prophets of Baal. The test - let the god who is true bring down fire from heaven to consume his sacrifice. Needless to say, we know who won - the Lord (for details turn to 1 Kings 18). But even after this, Jezebel chased Elijah away, and Elijah was distraught.

Even after such a great victory, Elijah complained to the Lord that he was the only one left in all of Israel that was a believer. The Lord assured him he was not. The Lord assured him that even though things looked bad, the Lord was in control. The Lord assured him that God's word would not come to an end after he was gone. One of the ways the Lord would guarantee that was by providing Elijah with a successor. That successor was a man who had a similar name - Elisha. The Lord directed Elijah to Elisha. Elisha was just one of the 7,000 believers still around in the land of Israel.

We meet Elisha as he is plowing his ground, preparing it for crops to be planted. He is plowing not using just one ox, nor even a pair of oxen. Elisha was using 12 pairs of oxen to plow his field. This was no ordinary farmer, this was a wealthy farmer. With all those oxen, the plowing was far easier and more efficient than plowing by hand. This was the man God had chosen to succeed Elijah. We don't have this insight, but I wonder what Elijah was thinking when he first saw Elisha. Did he wonder why would a man like this, a man who seems to have everything, give it all up to be a prophet? Or did he think ministry would be much easier with the resources of Elisha behind him? Whatever Elijah was thinking he still followed the will of God and placed his cloak on Elisha's shoulders.

The placing of Elijah's cloak on Elisha didn't need explanation. The prophet's cloak was his calling card, part of his uniform of sorts. By placing his cloak on Elisha's shoulders, he was inviting Elisha into the prophetic ministry. Notice, he wasn't forcing Elisha into the ministry, but he was inviting him. This is a key difference and the very reason Elijah said, **"What have I done for you?"** when Elisha wanted to say goodbye to his family. Elijah (and God) never wanted Elisha to feel forced or obligated into this ministry, he wanted Elisha to have a willingness for ministry.

And we see Elisha's willingness. We see what FOLLOWING MEANS for Elisha in very practical terms. It meant a willingness to leave behind his family, his occupation. For he took the plowing equipment, broke it down and then slaughtered his 12 pairs of oxen and cooked a great feast for those who were near and dear to him. Just consider the wealth he was sacrificing here, the value of the animals and the equipment, and likely this was not the extent of his wealth. Yet, for Elisha, FOLLOWING MEANS a willingness to leave it behind.

Did this mean that Elisha's former occupation was bad or that it would've been wrong for Elisha to continue in that occupation? No, of course not. But Elisha chose to give up the good that God had given him to follow after Elisha. It's something that we can consider in our own lives. Compare your faith to a marriage. A husband tells his wife that he loves her so much he would die for her. But when the wife asks him to take out the garbage, he groans. In this example, he's willing to die for her, but he's not willing to live for her. The same thing can be true in our lives as Christians. We might say that we are willing to die for our faith, but when it comes to FOLLOWING, we aren't willing to live for him. As Christians, God wants us to be willing not only to die for him, but also live for him. To be willing to leave behind some things that may otherwise be good.

FOLLOWING MEANS a willingness to leave it behind. It's the willing spirit God is looking for. A willing spirit to follow him. And while there have been times that we have shown a willingness towards God and his will, there have been all too many times when we have not been willing. There have been far too many times when we have seen our Christian lives more as rules to follow than ways to glorify God. There have been far too many times when we view Christianity as the "good" things we gave up, instead of the good thing God gave up. There have been far too many times when we have continued to follow our own inclinations, our own preferences, our own desires above and before following God and his Word.

Far too often we have not been willing to leave it behind and we have not been willing to follow him. And God demands that we follow him not just most of the time but all of the time, and one lack of following him leads us away from him for eternity. Thanks be to God there was someone who not only knew what FOLLOWING MEANS but did it. He is the same one who called disciples to be fishers of men. He is the one who not only was willing to leave it all behind, but did. He left behind the glories of heaven to live a humble life here on this earth, but not just any humble life, the humble and perfect life God demanded. He was disrespected and taken advantage of at every turn. And he willingly left his own dignity at the door when he was condemned to die on a cross, he left behind his excuses when God turned his back on him. FOLLOWING HIM MEANT saving us.

(2)

Jesus' FOLLOWING MEANS we now can follow willingly too. We follow willingly when we leave behind our old lives and we have a new willingness to look forward, just like Elisha did. Elisha did not know exactly what lay ahead in his new life, but he was not oblivious to his surroundings. There was still much animosity towards the Lord coming primarily from wicked queen Jezebel. Elisha's life would not become a bed of roses. Being a prophet was a hard road to plow. But Elisha knew what FOLLOWING MEANS. It meant a willingness to look forward.

After Elisha had burned his plowing equipment, after he had slaughtered his oxen used for plowing, after he had fed his guests and said goodbye to his mother and father **"he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant."** Elisha's call into the ministry was not a call to follow wealth, but a call to follow service. He would become Elijah's servant, learning from him, growing from him, and one day in the future, he would take up Elijah's position as prophet over Israel. He would continue to share God's message with his people. A people, who like us, need to hear both God's condemnation over sin, and God's forgiveness found in a Savior.

While many of us have not been called into the full-time ministry like Elisha was, we have been called by God. The apostle Peter says, **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.”** And God has a purpose in calling us, Peter continues, **“that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”** I’d like you to think about something. When was the last time you declared God’s praises?

Unless you’ve been completely checked out for the last 40 minutes, the last time you’ve declared God’s praises is here in church - through the songs you’ve sang and confession you’ve spoken. But what about before that? Before this morning, when was the last time you declared God’s praises? Hopefully you don’t have to think too hard, and maybe if you do, it might be time to consider how you can declare God’s praises. Your praises may not be shouting “Hallelujah” at work or school, but it could simply be doing the best job you can at work or at school. It could be listening to your parents or trying your best to raise your kids. This is how you can declare God’s praises.

While there still may be times when we do not declare God’s praises, before God it’s like we never stop. Because our declarations are added to what Christ has already done (and not the other way around). This is what it means to be willing to look forward. We don’t consider our past, but rather we consider our future with Christ, and not just our future here in this world, but ultimately our future with Christ in the world to come. We have been called not to a life of wealth, but a life of service, service to our Savior.

Consider that question once more, FOLLOWING MEANS what? Think specifically of one way you could finish that sentence. Have you got it? Good! Still don’t have it? Keep thinking. Have you finished that sentence: FOLLOWING MEANS... Now go out and do, think or say that one thing that FOLLOWING MEANS to you. Amen.