

John 1:35-51

We are continuing this morning in our series of studies on the Gospel of John, picking up at verse 35 of chapter 1 and working through to verse 51 of the same chapter. If you have been with us for any part of this series then you may remember that John's Gospel is the last of the four Gospels to have been written, probably around the year 80, by the Apostle John, and is aiming specifically, although not exclusively, at the Jews who had been dispersed throughout the then known world. As John was most likely in the city of Ephesus, the people there would have been his primary audience, but since the Scriptures are ultimately the result of the Holy Spirit's super-intending authorship, we know that these words are significant for God's people in every age, including our own.

For the past two weeks we have been looking at verses 19-34, which are themselves an expansion on what John wrote in verses 6-8, and which talk about the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. In the end we saw how John the Baptist's whole ministry was about calling God's people back to him in repentance and then, when the time was right - i.e., when God's Son appeared - John faithfully turned the peoples' attention from himself and toward Jesus, the Lamb of God. In short, John's ministry can be summarized as *preparatory, as self-deferential and as Christ referential*.

This week we turn our attention to events in the early days of Jesus' ministry, sometime after his baptism, when people are beginning to take notice of him and, as a result, are starting to identify themselves with him. And, while the ESV has entitled this section "Jesus calls the First Disciples", that description *may* be slightly pre-mature. As many of you will likely know, those bold faced descriptions that appear between the paragraphs in your English bibles are not actually part of the original manuscripts but are placed there by the Bible publisher to help structure and break up the text.

And so, what I'm saying is that, in this particular case, I think the title given is not as helpful as it might be, especially when you compare Jesus' encounters with the disciples - as described here - with His encounters with them as they appear in the other Gospels. When you compare these encounters you see that what *John* is describing here must have taken place *before*, and perhaps not too *long* before, the things described in, for example, the Gospel of Matthew. That being the case, what we are seeing in verses 35-51 are not so much Jesus' calling his disciples - in the sense of his setting apart the twelve *main* disciples - as they are a record of Jesus' first *encounters* with men who, very soon, *would* be challenged to identify with Jesus even *more* fully than they do in these first encounters.

And so, these early encounters with Jesus, and why they are significant, will be the subject of our study this morning. Before we go any further into that, let's pray together.....

Father in heaven, please guide us now into the truth which you have preserved for us and which you have prepared us for. Continue your transforming work within us, by which you draw us closer to you and, through that, teach us to love you with all our hearts and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. In Jesus name, Amen.....

John 1:35-37 *The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.*

The first thing I want to draw your attention to this morning is *the amazing humility of John the Baptist*. As the passage begins we see him standing with a couple of his disciples when Jesus comes by. And, just as before, when Jesus walks by John cannot contain himself and cries aloud, "Behold the Lamb of God!" And immediately upon hearing this, the two disciples who were with John turned and began walking behind Jesus, following him.

And John doesn't say a word. He just stands there and watches as they walk away.

Frankly, I think that's pretty amazing. Here is a man who practiced what he preached. John said that he came to pave the way, to prepare the way for one who would come after him - a person who was so *beyond* him that John didn't feel that he was even worthy enough to untie this person's sandals. And so now that this person - Jesus - *has* come along John continues to point other people to him, even if it meant that his own ministry changed, or declined or just ceased to exist altogether. Even if it meant that he might lose some pretty valuable disciples - maybe even all of them. How was John able to do this? Because he understood that *it was not about him, it was about Jesus*.

I heard a story once about a preacher who, as he was preparing to conduct an evening worship service, noticed that many, many of the usual attenders were absent. So many were missing, in fact, that he felt compelled to ask one of the few who *had* shown up if she knew what was going on. The reply he got from her was that "there was a visiting preacher over at such-and-such church and that, apparently, God was using his preaching in a very powerful way". Upon hearing this, the pastor announced, "Well then, we shall have to go and listen to him too". And with that, he shut the place down, turned out the lights, and he and his congregation went to hear this visiting preacher. How could this pastor do this? Because he understood that *it was not about him, it was about Jesus*.

When Lisa and I first rolled into town here, and we were beginning to try and gather together a small core of people to found this church, a local pastor commended to me a certain couple that would have been a terrific asset to his own church - had they remained - and yet he told me he was glad to see them be able to be a part of what God was doing here. How could a pastor let people go like that? He can do it only by remembering the Gospel - and through constantly reminding himself that it is not about him, or his success - it's about Jesus.

Friends, the humility that we see in John the Baptist, and echoed in others, is the sort of humility we need among church leaders today. As one writer put it, "At a time when public trust in Christian leaders is at an all-time low, the world is in desperate need of preachers who are prepared to mortgage their personal ambitions and popularity out of a consuming concern for Jesus' pre-eminence and the advance of his cause...." The same point is made from a completely opposite angle when we remember the haunting challenge of the atheist philosopher Nietzsche, who said, "Show me you are redeemed, and I will believe in your Redeemer".

There is a strong message and challenge in these verses for Christian leaders. But it's not just Christian leaders who need to hear this. We *all* need to hear this. Every one of us needs to be prepared to make the same sort of self-less, humble decisions in order to advance the Gospel. We all need to be reminded - and to remind one another - that it's not about us - it's about Jesus. It's about the Gospel.

And I'll tell you what, God willing, we will find ourselves one day in a situation not too dis-similar from John's. Because one of our long term goals at South Baton Rouge is to be a church that God uses to plant other churches - both locally and abroad. And that will mean a lot of things for us, but one thing it will *definitely* mean is that a day is coming when some of you may be challenged to go and be a part of a new work in another part of this city. And when that happens, we all need to be self-less enough, and humble enough, and Gospel-centered enough to *let each other go* in order that the work of God's Kingdom might go ahead.

Right. Moving on, the next thing I want to draw your attention to this morning is this very *penetrating, arresting* question that Jesus asks, found in verses 38-39....

John 1:38-39 *Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"* ³⁹ *He said to them, "Come and you will see." So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.¹*

So, Jesus comes walking by, in response to which John says, "Behold the Lamb of God", at which point the two disciples begin following Jesus, and then Jesus suddenly turns, stops them in their tracks, and confronts them with this question, "What are you seeking?" Clearly they are *following* him in an effort to learn more about him - but Jesus wants to know at the very beginning what they are *really* after. Is it just information? Or is there something else, something deeper that they want from him? What are they seeking?

Well, it's a searching question that Jesus asks. And, to their credit, these two followers of John seemed to have been genuine and seemed to have been aware of the *gravity* of Jesus' question. Which is why, instead of answering Jesus' question straight away, they instead ask Jesus where he is going. They know he has asked them a good question, and rather than just trying to come up with a hasty response, they are hoping to sit down somewhere and talk through the answer to that question. And so, again, they ask Jesus where He is going and, in the end, are invited to come and stay with him.

Now it would have been great to have had the opportunity to sit in on the discussions that took place. But the fact is that we don't know what went on for the rest of that day, and on into the night, no doubt. The only thing we do know is that by the time the sun came up the next morning, Jesus the *Rabbi* had become, on Andrew's lips, Jesus *the Messiah* as he ran off to share this discovery with his brother. Apparently they *were* looking for something more than a Rabbi. And apparently they found what they were looking for. Or, to put it more precisely - what they were looking for found them.

At any rate, it seems to me that this same question “What are you seeking?” is one that everyone that *begins* to follow Jesus must answer, at some point. Because people *start* following Jesus for all sorts of reasons. John’s *disciples* started following Jesus as a consequence of some remark that John made about him being the Lamb of God. People in our own day will line up behind Jesus for a variety of *other* reasons, as well. Some are simply curious, some want understanding, others are fearful, some love tradition, some want security, some are worn out, some want a better life, some want fewer troubles, and some are genuinely broken and distressed by the darkness of their hearts - people *start* following Jesus for all sorts of reasons.

But whatever may be our reasons for *starting* to follow Jesus, the only acceptable, legitimate basis for *continuing* to follow him must be grounded in his identity as our Savior and Lord. Anything less than this simply will not do. The Jesus we are seeking must be the Jesus who IS. To use the language of this passage, Jesus is not interested in *just* being your Rabbi - your teacher. He is not interested in just being a provider of good things for you. He is not interested in just being your comforter. He will accept nothing less than being Lord and Savior.

What are you seeking? What do you *really* want from Jesus? Those are penetrating questions that must be answered by everyone who begins to follow Jesus.

But those questions are not *only* for those who are just starting out in following Jesus - they are continuing, perennial questions for those who have *been* following Jesus for quite some time. Because the reality, for many professing believers, is that while Jesus IS their Lord and Savior, and they would proudly say so, for all practical purposes, He is nothing of the sort. In terms of their daily lives, he has been reduced to an occasional consultant, a moral reference point, an aspirin, or a genie in a bottle.

And we all get into those places, but if that’s where you are, and you’re one of His, let me tell you, the day is coming, and maybe soon, when Jesus will turn around, and stop *you* in *your* tracks and confront you, again, with this same sort of question, “What are you seeking? Why *are* you following me? or even better, Why are you *still* following me”

The third thing I want to draw your attention to this morning has to do with the pattern of witness or witnessing that we see demonstrated in these verses.

John 1:40-49 *One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus¹ 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, "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter¹). ⁴³ 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." ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!"*

⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Now, having just read that to you, and before we look any further at these verses, I need to tell you that this translation of the Greek, while good, is not the *only* legitimate rendering of this passage in English. And the particular verse in question here is verse 43,

John 1:43 *The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."*

Now, that is *one* way that this verse *could* be translated. However, there is another possible translation that is equally legitimate. And the reason for this is because the Greek text is ambiguous. It doesn't actually say "Jesus decided to go" it says "HE decided to go". And the question for the translators is - "Who is the "he" that is being referred to here?" And the two possibilities are *Jesus* or *Andrew*.

The NIV and ESV translations have opted for "Jesus". However, at least one prominent NT scholar - Don Carson - believes it should read the other way and I, for one, agree with him, so that the text *should* read,

John 1:40-49 *One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus¹ 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, "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter¹). ⁴³ The next day **Andrew** decided to go to Galilee, and found Philip. And Jesus said to Philip, "Follow me."*

Now, there isn't really time for me to go into detail about *why* I favor this translation, but I will at least *list* some of the reasons for you. Firstly, I favor it because this translation makes better sense alongside the *other* accounts of Jesus' interaction with the disciples, found in the *other* Gospels. Secondly, I favor it because it makes sense of some things in the text itself which, in the current translation, seem out of place. For example, vs 41 tells us that Andrew **FIRST** went to see his brother Simon. But we are never told who he went to see **SECOND**. Translating the verses as Carson has suggested would solve this difficulty. A third reason supporting this changed translation is because it seems to fit better with the overall flow and pattern of the passage itself.

What IS that pattern? Well, working with this slightly different translation, let me see if I can make it clear enough for you by quickly walking through the events here:

- 1) John testifies that Jesus is the Lamb of God, in the presence of two disciples.
- 2) These two disciples then follow Jesus home, where they can inquire further about the significance of what John has said.

- 3) Convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, Andrew runs off, firstly, to tell his brother, Simon Peter about it. Simon then comes to meet Jesus and Jesus changes his name.
- 4) Andrew then goes off, secondly, to tell Philip about Jesus, which he does and Philip too comes back with him to meet Jesus, at which point Jesus says to him, "Follow me".
- 5) Now Philip, being himself convinced about Jesus, goes and finds Nathanael and tells him "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."
- 6) Now Nathanael is a little skeptical and makes a rather cutting remark about the unlikelihood of *anything* good coming out of Nazareth - to which Philip wisely responds, not by attempting to argue him out of that belief - but by simply inviting him to come and see. The best way to deal with prejudice is *presence* - which is a sermon for another day.
- 7) And so as Nathanael approaches Jesus, Jesus calls out to him and says "An Israelite indeed, *in whom there is no deceit.*" Now these comments catch Nathanael off guard because he has not yet met Jesus but somehow this man he has never met manages - in a few simple words - to absolutely *nail him* with regard to his personality.
- 8) Nathanael is intrigued by this and wants to know how Jesus knows him so well. And in response to *this*, Jesus describes something - sitting under a fig tree - which Nathanael *immediately recognizes* as information that only someone who was divine would have been able to gain.
- 9) As a result, Nathanael is convinced of Jesus' identity and begins to call him Rabbi, and Son of God, and King of Israel. In other words, Nathanael gives him the highest praise he knows how to give.

So that's the sequence of events, in a nutshell. And, if you will then step back a little bit and think about this passage as a whole for a minute, what you come up with is a pattern that goes something like this:

People are brought into contact with Jesus.

Once they see him for who he is, they turn around and tell other people about him.

That's really about it. It's simple, yes. But it's also *profound*. Seeing Jesus leads to sharing about Jesus. Revelation leads to proclamation. There are a lot of ways you could say it, but they all point to this same reality. And this should not come as any sort of surprise to us, really. Don't we behave this way with so many other things in our lives? You run across a neat webpage - and you send the URL along to a few friends. You read a good book and you want to talk about it with other people. You hear a funny story and you want to tell it to someone else. You see a good movie and you can't wait to talk to another person who has also seen it. That's the normal pattern.

Likewise, everyone that comes to Jesus seems to feel the need to go and find another person and bring *them* to Jesus. Witness is what we ought to expect - it is the natural result of meeting Jesus, of having one's eyes opened, of seeing him for who he is. That is evangelism in its purest form - introducing others to this treasure you have found. In short, witness works best when it is grounded in *wonder*.

Finally, after all that we have seen, I want you to please notice Jesus' response to Nathanael's comments.....

John 1:50-51 *Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."*

In response to Nathanael's burst of praise, brought on by Jesus' sharing a divine insight about him, Jesus goes on to tell Nathanael that he will see even greater things than that which he has already seen. But it's not just Nathanael that will see these things. When Jesus says, "You" will see heaven opened, the word there, in the Greek, is *plural*, not singular. In other words, Nathanael and many others will see these things. What will they see? Jesus defines it for them in verse 51. They will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

Now what does all this mean? Simply put, Jesus uses words here that are drawing from an OT story that Jews would have been familiar with - Genesis 28 - and the story of Jacob. In particular, Jesus is alluding to a dream that Jacob had, and which involved angels ascending and descending a ladder that stood between heaven and earth. It was in and through this dream that God confirmed and established Jacob as the recipient of His blessings. Further, it was through Jacob's offspring that we get the twelve tribes which eventually become the 12 divisions that made up the Nation of Israel.

And so, in using this language to refer to himself, Jesus is saying that the high esteem in which they held Jacob would be matched and even surpassed by the blessing which God would bestow upon Jesus - who would also be the one through whom God established his *new nation* with 12 *new tribes* - as symbolized by the 12 apostles whom Jesus chose and set apart. To be sure, at the time that Jesus said these things to Nathanael, he would likely have had no clue as to the deeper implications behind what Jesus said - but such understanding would come in time. In short, these verses tell us that what Jacob was in shadow and in part, Jesus would be clearly, openly and fully.