

## **“FELLOWSHIP”**

**Matthew 9:9-10**

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Matthew 9:9-10: As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.

Calvin, the comic strip character kid, is talking to his tiger friend, Hobbs, one day. “I am the decisive type!” he says. “See, we’ll go this way,” Calvin continued, pointing in one direction. “Have fun,” Hobbs says, as he turn and walks in the opposite direction. In the last frame, Calvin has fallen into a creek. Up to his neck in water, he says, “The problem is that nobody wants to go where I lead.”

Without debating the wisdom of Calvin as leader, it is fair to say that leadership has become one of the key issues of our times. We are in the midst of an election year where we as a nation are deciding who will lead us in a difficult time. Historian James McGregor Burns has a book entitled, simply, *Leadership*, in which he writes that, “One of the most universal cravings of our time is a hunger for compelling and creative leadership.” He goes on to say that, “We are living in a time of mediocre leadership politically and intellectually.” There seem to be no Winston Churchills, or Abraham Lincolns. There has been a vacuum of real leadership.

But part of me wonders if this is the whole problem. Part of me wonders if Calvin, in his own twisted kind of way, might not be right: that nobody wants to go where leaders want to lead us. We may, also, be facing a crisis or followship. On my shelves, I have all kinds of titles on leadership. But I don’t have a single book which deals with followship. Somehow the idea is, if we have the right leaders, then all of our problems would be solved. But maybe what is needed is not just good leaders, but good followers also.

The problem is that followship has gotten a bad name. For one thing, leaders have, too often, left followers with a bad taste in their mouths. From Watergate, to Irangate, to Whitewater, to Katrina; from board rooms to pulpits, to sporting arenas, we have been rocked by one scandal after another. We have discovered that our leaders have clay feet; the emperor is wearing no clothes. And so, we have grown rather cynical about leaders. Our confidence has been undermined.

You have probably seen the bumper sticker which reads, “Question Authority.” And maybe that’s a good thing. “No one wants to go where I lead,” Calvin complains. And it’s a good thing they don’t or they would end up in the creek up to their necks. Leaders have often given followers a bad name. We shy away from being led down another primrose path. We take what leaders tell us with more than a grain of salt.

But, our reluctance to follow also has to do with our own sense of personal freedom; of wanting to march to the beat of our own drum.

I remember watching one of those National Geographic television specials about those furry little creatures called Lemmings. These small brown rodents that live in the arctic regions, have a rather strange habit of plunging in mass to their deaths. Hundreds of thousands of these creatures will come to a cliff overlooking the sea where they will follow each other and plunge to their deaths.

Some of us are old enough to remember the mass suicides in a place called Jonestown in Guyana. There cult leader Jim Jones led 918 followers to drink poison – men, women, children – all led like sheep to the slaughter.

And we certainly don't want to be like that. We rebel against a kind of herd mentality. Blind obedience gives being a follower a bad name. We are more comfortable being the master of our own fate, the captain of our own souls.

All this makes it rather hard for us to hear and heed the words of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel records that, "As Jesus was walking along one day, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.'" Imagine that. Here is a man practicing his trade, going about his business – and a very lucrative business at that – and Jesus says, "Follow me." Matthew was wealthy. He had made it to the top of his profession. His stock portfolio was healthy. He had everything he needed. And Jesus has the audacity to say to him, "I want you to leave all this behind now, and come follow me." A person would have to be a bit crazy to just walk away to follow an itinerant rabbi, like that. But that's exactly what Matthew the tax collector does. He got up and followed him! Doesn't even take time to close the books, to settle accounts. He simply follows.

The question is, Why? Why would you leave all that? Why would you want to become a follower? What was in this for Matthew? For us?

For one thing, the idea of following means that Matthew was finally getting to go somewhere. For years he had sat behind his table collecting taxes. But it wasn't getting him where he wanted to be. He was tired of sitting life out. If he was going to get somewhere, it wasn't going to be by himself.

Often, we come together to do things that can't be done when we are apart. We can do more together than we can alone. But to come together, we must be willing to seek something beyond our own good – we look for a common good.

I can still remember the first time I heard a symphony as a child. In those days, the Birmingham Symphony would give special concerts for school children at the Boutwell Auditorium. It meant a day out of school and a trip downtown. So I went. When we got to our seats, the orchestra was milling around on the stage. They were all, kind of, playing their individual instruments. It was the most awful sound I had ever heard. It was just noise. I wondered what in the world we had come to hear. I didn't realize they were just warming up. But then the conductor walked out on the stage. The orchestra was immediately silent. The conductor bowed to the audience, turn to the orchestra, lifted his baton...and suddenly that cacophony of clashing noise melted into a harmony of music that filled the auditorium.

What changed? Each of the members of the orchestra was still playing his or her own instrument! But, instead of playing just what they wanted to play, as they wanted to play, they allowed the conductor to lead them – to unite their individual sounds into a harmonious whole.

There was no loss of individuality. No one ceased to play their own instrument. They simply allowed themselves to be led so they could create music together.

Why be a follower? It depends on whether we want to make music or just make noise, doesn't it? If all we want to do in life is to make as much noise as possible, then we simply go around tooting our own horn without regard for anyone or anything else. There are a lot of noisemakers in the world who are content to be disruptive instead of constructive. But if we want to make music, then we have to join efforts. Yes, we even have to become followers. That doesn't mean we become part of a herd. We don't give up our individuality. But we learn to play in concert with others.

One of the things that we as a society have to relearn from time to time, is the concept of a common good. There is enough noise in the world. We need more harmony. Sometimes, we may need to take the lead, but other times we need to follow, allowing our efforts to be joined with others. The sum is greater than the parts.

And what we may find is that the common good is also good for us. George Bernard Shaw, the English playwright, in his book *Man and Superman*, wrote that "the true joy in life, is being used for a purpose that is larger than yourself;...the being a force of nature instead of a feverish...little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making us happy."

I think this is what Jesus meant when he said, "I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly." The abundant life that Jesus is talking about isn't had through a path of narrow self-interest. The most miserable people I know are the most self-absorbed people I know. And *vice versa*. The most fulfilled people I know are the most selfless; those who have found a larger purpose for their lives.

You may have heard the story of a traveler who came to the French town of Chartres to see the great church that was being built there. Arriving at the end of the day, he went to see the sight as the workers were leaving. He asked one man, covered in dust, what he did. And the man replied that he was a stonemason. He spent his days cracking rocks. Another, when asked, said he was a glassblower who spent his days making slabs of colored glass. Still another, a blacksmith who pounded iron for a living. Then the visitor wandered deep into the unfinished church and came upon an old woman armed with a broom who was sweeping up after the day's work. "What are you doing?" the visitor asked. She stopped, leaned on her broom and looking up into the high arches, with a gleam in her eye, she said, "I am building a great cathedral for the glory of God."

Life's deepest joys are reserved for those who are following something more than their appetites; those who have found their place in God's larger purpose.

Being a follower is not all bad. In fact, it may lead to greater good. That is...if we are good followers.

Stuart Briscoe tells about a young minister friend who was officiating at the funeral of a war veteran. The dead man's friends wanted to have a part in the service at the funeral home. So they requested that the pastor lead them down to the casket, stand with them for a moment of remembrance, and then lead them out a side door. This they proceeded to do, but the effect was marred when the pastor chose the wrong door. Instead of marching out the side door, they marched with military precision into a broom closet, and had to beat a hasty retreat in confusion. The moral

is that, if you are going to be a follower, make sure you are following someone who knows where they are going.

To be a follower doesn't mean that we give up responsibility for our own actions and our own lives. The excuse that we are just following orders is no excuse. To say I was doing what everybody else was doing, it just following the crowd.. That kind of thing gives followship a bad name. To be a good follower means we learn to discern which is the way to life, and who will lead us there.

Soon after Matthew leaves his tax table to follow Jesus, they are approached by the leader of the synagogue whose daughter is gravely ill. Jesus is delayed in reaching the house where the girl lay, and when he gets there, they tell him she is dead. "She is not dead, but sleeping," Jesus says, and they laugh at him. But Jesus has the last laugh because he went in, took the girl by the hand and led her alive out of the house. Pretty good first day for Matthew the tax collector. He was used to seeing deadbeats, but suddenly he sees life where there was only death. And he begins to get the sense that the One he was following did indeed have the word of life.

The truth is that we are all followers of something or someone. The question is, Who? And, where are they leading us? There are leaders who would lead us down paths of division and destruction; whose vision is of power, not service; who seek their own good not a common good; who are about ego and not equality. Our call comes from Christ who promises to lead us to life.

But there is one more thing about this business of being a follower. Not only can leaders give followers a bad name, the reverse is also true. Followers can give leaders a bad name

Mahatma Gandhi is one of the most respected leaders of modern history. He led the independence movement in India, and became the champion of non-violent change. A Hindu, Gandhi nevertheless admired Jesus and often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount. Once when the missionary E. Stanley Jones met with Gandhi he asked him, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?" Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Apparently Gandhi's rejection of Christianity grew out of an incident that happened when he was a young man practicing law in South Africa. He had become attracted to the Christian faith, had studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, and was seriously exploring becoming a Christian. And so, he decided to attend a church service. As he came up the steps of the large church where he intended to go, a white South African elder of the church barred his way at the door. "Where do you think you're going, kaffir?" the man asked Gandhi in a belligerent tone of voice. Gandhi replied, "I'd like to attend worship here." The church elder snarled at him, "There's no room for kaffirs in this church. Get out of here or I'll have my assistants throw you down the steps." From that moment, Gandhi said, he decided to adopt what good he found in Christianity but would never again consider becoming a Christian if it meant being part of the church.

We are facing a challenge of leadership in almost every arena of life today. We need bold, visionary leaders, who have a common good in mind. But there is also a crisis in followship. "Follow me," Jesus said. Matthew left his table, turned from sitting life out, and followed. Will we?