

“Follow Me”

The Seventh in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 1:35-51; Genesis 28:10-22

John the Baptist said of Jesus, “he must increase and I must decrease.” In the closing verses of John chapter 1 this is exactly what happens. John identifies Jesus as the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” John also identifies Jesus and the very Son of God. Jesus is that one greater than John, who was before John, and about whom John had been preaching. But John represents the old order of things about to pass away into obsolescence, because the turning point in redemptive history has come. When Jesus approaches John a second time, John directs two of his own disciples to follow Jesus because he knows the messianic mission of Jesus is about to begin.

As we continue our series on John’s Gospel, John’s account now moves on from the messianic forerunner (John the Baptist) to the Messiah himself. In verses 35-51 of John 1 (our text), the focus shifts away from preliminary matters to the formal beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. In this section, we have John’s account (likely as an eyewitness and participant) of Jesus initial meeting of several of the men who would become his first followers, men whom eventually we come to know as Jesus’ “disciples.” Our text can be a bit confusing because it recounts events not found in the other gospels, and which at first glance may even seem to contradict the account of these same events in the synoptics. As we will see, this is not the case and these issues are easily resolved.

As we saw a couple of sermons ago, the events which follow immediately after the prologue of John (vv. 1-18) focus first upon John the Baptist (vv. 19-28), then John’s identification of Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (vv. 29-34). But in our passage (vv. 35-51), John recounts events which occur over the next two days. The time line and chronology which is set out by John in this section of his Gospel is interesting, if not highly symbolic. In verses 19-28, the first day in this sequence of events, John the Baptist (the other John) is confronted by a group of Levites and priests from Jerusalem. These men (who are likely aligned with the Sadducees) were either sent by Pharisees, or else included Pharisees among their number. This is significant because the Sadducees and Pharisees were theological and political enemies—they hated each other, but were united in their opposition to John. John the Baptist was the son of a priest and Levite, and so the group of Jews who came from Jerusalem to confront him out in the Judean wilderness, were probably troubled that one of their own had strayed from the faith. When the group finds John, they ask him if he is the Messiah. John says no. They ask him if he is the prophet. He says no. They ask him if he is Elijah come back from heaven. John says he is not. Well, then who is he? John tells his inquisitors that he is the voice out in the wilderness (foretold in Isaiah 40), warning Israel that the Messiah is about to be revealed. But the real issue for the group sent from Jerusalem is that John is preaching and baptizing without the permission and sanction of the Jewish religious leadership, and even worse, the number of people following John out in the wilderness is growing rapidly. Something significant is going on. Messianic expectation was reaching a fever pitch.

In verses 29-34, John (the Disciple and author of the Gospel) describes what happened the very next day (day two in this sequence of events) when John (the Baptist) sees Jesus approach. Although John does not report this, we can safely assume that the large crowds are still present, as are the priests and Levites. When John the Baptist identifies Jesus as “the Lamb of God,” he is informing the priests and Levites (the men who actually perform the sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple) that a new age in redemptive history was about to begin, and that Jesus will supercede (or replace) the twice-daily sacrifice in the temple of a

lamb which turned aside the wrath of God. Jesus is the true sinless Lamb of God, whose death upon the cross will fulfill that to which the sacrifice of the lambs in the Jerusalem temple had pointed.

If Jesus is the “Lamb of God,” then, as John points out, Jesus is the true temple of God (a point made in the next chapter, 2:19-21). Jesus will do something animal sacrifices could never do, take away the guilt of the sin of the world. Jesus’ death will fulfill all of the types and shadows of the Old Testament. Looking back on what had happened earlier—when the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus and remained upon him after John had baptized him—that was then the Baptist realized that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and the very Son of God. Jesus is the one coming after him, and John’s divine call was to be the forerunner of someone much greater than he, whose sandals he was unworthy to untie.

Therefore, in speaking of Jesus as the Lamb of God, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the suffering servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, who will judge the nations (Isaiah 42) and the Messiah who would, according to Isaiah 61, affirm that “*the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” Jesus is the eternal word become flesh. He is Israel’s Messiah whose mission will now begin.

In verses 35-51 of John 1, John (the Disciple) recounts events which occur over the course of the next two days. On day three, Andrew and his brother Peter learn of Jesus (from John the Baptist), and then on day four, Philip and Nathanael likewise begin following Jesus (immediately proclaiming Jesus to be king of Israel, and the Son of God). So, when we read in John 2:1, that the events in Cana (where Jesus performs the first of his miraculous signs) occur three days later, we have a series of events which occur over the course of seven days. Some have made much of this chronology, seeing it as symbolic of the seven days of creation, culminating with Jesus’ creation of new wine at a wedding (a symbol of the marriage supper of Christ the Lamb) occurring on the seventh day (the eternal Sabbath). At the very least, we can say that John the Disciple spells out the chronology here quite carefully, and in terms which are loaded with echoes from and allusions to the Old Testament.¹

The events which transpire in the closing verses of chapter 1 are unique to John’s Gospel. In the synoptic gospels (Matthew 4:18-22 Mark 1:16-20), we read the following account of Jesus’ call of his disciples. “*While walking by the Sea of Galilee, [Jesus] saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*” But in John’s gospel, we have the account of the initial meeting between Jesus and some of these men, at some point (likely but a few days) before Jesus actually calls them to leave behind their former lives as fishermen, and to devote themselves fully to him and to his mission.

Unlike the accounts of Jesus’ call in Matthew and Mark, in John 1:35-51 the emphasis falls upon the disciples realizing who Jesus is and then introducing others to him—something which they will now do over the course of their lives.² That these men were followers of Jesus from the very beginning is also

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 168.

² Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 79.

important. In fact, when Jesus begins to teach the disciples about the work of the Holy Spirit (John 15:26-27), Jesus can say, “*but when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, the will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.*” As John the Baptist has borne witness about the identity of the man who approached him, whom he had baptized earlier, so too, those who follow Jesus from the beginning will likewise “bear witness” about Jesus who is the word become flesh, and the Son of God. In fact, the theme of this section of John is witnesses bearing, first by John the Baptist, and then by the first followers of Jesus.

As we turn to our text, we take up with the events of the third day (vv. 35-42), and the invitation given to Jesus’ first disciples. We read in verses 35-36, “*the next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God!’*” The first two of Jesus disciples were followers of John the Baptist out in the Judean wilderness. It is remarkable that they become followers of Jesus *because* of the testimony of the Baptist. When Jesus appears the next day (day three) out in the wilderness—John and his two disciples see Jesus walking nearby—John identifies Jesus to two of his own disciples. “This man is the Lamb of God,” the one whom the Baptist had been telling them was to come after him.

The irony is that John the Baptist now directs these two of his own disciples to follow Jesus, while John must remain in the wilderness completing his mission. These two disciples are perhaps the first people claimed by the Kingdom of God—in Luke 16:16 we read “*the Law and the Prophets were until John [the Baptist]; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached.*” John belongs to the old order (the old covenant). As the new age in redemptive history begins, John is left behind.³ But this is John’s mission and his calling. He is not a follower of Jesus, but the “announcer” or “herald” of Jesus. And this is exactly what he has done—borne witness about the one coming after him.

John’s testimony about the coming Messiah did not fall on deaf ears. According to verse 37, “*the two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.*” One of these two men was Andrew, who, as we will see, was Simon Peter’s brother. The other disciple is not named, but from the very beginning of the church, Christians have identified this unnamed man as John the Disciple and author of this Gospel. The precise chronology, the mention of a specific time (in verse 39), seem to point in this direction. In any case, the two disciples of John the Baptist leave him to follow Jesus.

These two men were not abandoning the Baptist, but doing exactly as John directed them—following the one greater than he, who was before John, and about whom God had called John to testify. Jesus had been walking by, the group had seen him, John identified Jesus was the Son of God. Andrew and the other disciple left John and followed Jesus. The two-fold implication of the verb “to follow” is surely intentional. Jesus was obviously leaving the area where John was preaching, and these two followed him by walking in the same direction Jesus was. But as one writer points out, they were, at the same time, “taking the first steps of genuine discipleship.”⁴

The two new followers were noticed. “*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?’*” Seeing the two men walking behind him, Jesus asks of them a question. Again, there is the simple question you

³ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 80.

⁴ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 154.

would expect anyone in Jesus' situation to ask. But the question also gets at something deeper. "What are you *truly* seeking?" "Why would you would leave John to follow me?" Andrew (and presumably John) answer Jesus' simple question by using an honorific title (Rabbi) and then asking a question of their own. "Where are you staying?" They were, after all, out in the wilderness and the question may arise from the necessity of needing food, water, and shelter (it was 4:00 in the afternoon). But there is more going on than just this basic need to find shelter. Jesus is asking a much more important question.

Rabbi is a word which means "my great one." It was an honorific title used by students of their master (as John explains), and it is used of Jesus throughout John's Gospel. The two disciples of John have not yet met Jesus, and only know of him what John the Baptist had told them. The two followers are being polite and respectful. But Jesus' answer—another question as recounted in verse 39—will change their lives forever. Jesus "*said to them, 'Come and you will see.'*" With these words from Jesus, the relationship between the Messiah and his first two disciples began. "*So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.*" Jesus invites them to come and find out for themselves if what John the Baptist had told them about Jesus was really true. "Come and see" is an invitation extended to these two, even as it is extended to all inquirers throughout the ages.

A number of those who study John's Gospel have noticed the thrice-repeated reference to "staying" in these verses which is a way of referring to one's dwelling place. Many see an oblique reference back to the statement in verse 14 John's prologue, "*and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" Not only do we know the hour this happened, but the two disciples see the actual place where Jesus "stayed" and where he dwelt among us.⁵

In verse 40, the first disciple is identified. "*One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.*" That only one of these two disciples is named, points in the direction of John himself as the unnamed disciple. Since Andrew was not well-known in Christian circles, he is identified as the brother of Peter who was well-known in Christian circles. We read in verse 41, Andrew "*first found his own brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which means Christ).*" Messiah simply means anointed one, and when applied to Jesus by Andrew, it extends beyond Jesus' kingly office, to his three-fold office of prophet, priest, and king.

To put it simply, the Christ is that one foretold throughout the Old Testament who will fulfill all of the open-ended promises of the Old Testament, and in whom Israel's ultimate destiny and future is secured. Andrew has believed John the Baptist's testimony, has had that testimony confirmed after spending the afternoon and evening with Jesus. He finds his brother and convinces Peter that he needs to come and meet Jesus for himself. And this is exactly what happens. According to verse 42, Andrew "*brought [Peter] to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas' (which means Peter).*"

When Andrew brings his brother to Jesus, Jesus knows his name (how, we are not told—this may be by revelation, or Andrew may have told Jesus about his brother the night before). This passage anticipates the account in Matthew 16:17-18 ("*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*"). When Jesus looked at Peter, and renamed him "Cephas," (Aramaic for "rock"), Jesus is pointing to the change which will take place

⁵ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 82.

in Peter as he follows Jesus. Jesus also foretells of Peter's role in the early days of the church.

In verses 43-44, John takes up the events of the next day, (day four of this sequence), but the scene now shifts away from the Judean wilderness as Jesus adds two new disciples. "*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.*" The "he" of the second clause "**he** found Philip" is not identified. It might be Jesus, but more likely it is Andrew who found Philip because the theme of these verses is that before Jesus "officially" calls the disciples to leave everything behind later on (as recounted in the synoptic gospels), the disciples are themselves enthusiastically bearing witness to their friends and family about Jesus. John the Baptist "testifies" about Jesus to Andrew and John. Andrew goes and testifies to his brother Peter, and "he" (Andrew?) bears witness to Philip, and Philip will in turn bear witness to Nathanael.

F. F. Bruce identifies Bethsaida as "Fishtown" because the word literally means "house of fishermen," and because the fishing industry on the Sea of Galilee was centered there.⁶ Although not much is said of Philip in the synoptic gospels, John tells us quite a bit about him, perhaps because Christian tradition tells us that Philip was buried in the city of Hierapolis (in Asia Minor), in the same region as Ephesus where John ministered and wrote this gospel. This would be a point of interest to John's original readers. Since Andrew, Peter, and Philip, were from the same town (although Peter had at some point relocated to Capernaum) it is only natural that the first group of Jesus' disciples knew each other previously.

As the theme of bearing witness to others about Jesus unfolds, in verse 45, we read that "*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.'*" Philip is clearly engaged in what we might call "witnessing." Nathanael is likely the personal name of Batholomew. Philip does not specifically identify Jesus as the Messiah, but he does tell Nathanael that Jesus is the one who will fulfill everything written about the coming Messiah in the Old Testament. At a time and place where messianic expectations were great, Philip is basically telling Nathanael "the promised one has come. This is it!"

Philip also identifies Jesus as being from Nazareth, and the son of Joseph. It was common in that day to identify a man by his hometown and his father's name. Nathanael was not from Bethsaida, but from Cana. According to verse 45, "*Nathanael said to [Philip], 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'*" Nazareth, apparently, was a backwater town with a bad reputation in Cana. Philip presses Nathanael further. "*Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'*" If Nathanael did not believe Philip, then he too can "come and see" as Philip had done. The invitation is extended yet again. It was then that Jesus "*saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!'*" In other words, Jesus identifies Nathanael as an "honest man," open to "seeing" what it was that Jesus had to say.

A most interesting dialogue now begins between the two men. "*Nathanael said to [Jesus], 'How do you know me?'* Jesus answered him, '*Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.*'" Jesus not only knew that Nathanael was an honest man, open to the claims of Jesus, but Jesus had also seen him under a fig tree. Much ink has been spilt debating the meaning of the symbolism of the fig tree, but the more important issue that Jesus had some sort of supernatural knowledge about him—Jesus had seen Nathanael under a fig tree even though he had not yet laid eyes on Nathanael. Ironically, Nathanael has now "seen" himself. According to verse 49, "*Nathanael answered [Jesus], 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'*" Everything that Nathanael has heard from Philip is

⁶ F. F. Bruce, The Gospel of John (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 59.

true. He has come to Jesus to see for himself, and what did he “see”? A man with supernatural knowledge, prompting Nathanael’s confession of Jesus as both Son of God and Israel’s king (i.e., Israel’s Messiah) and heir to David’s (kingly) throne.

Jesus’ response to Nathanael’s confession in verses 50-51 is first instance of the double “amen” formula which appears throughout John’s Gospel (“truly” “truly”). In other words, what follows is divine revelation. *“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.’ 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 light of Jesus’ question to Nathanael, “do you believe?” in response to Nathanael’s confession of Jesus as the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah, Jesus promises that Nathanael will “see” much more than Jesus’ supernatural knowledge about his sitting under a fig tree.

“When heaven opens,” Nathanael and the others will see the same remarkable vision which Jacob saw as recounted in Genesis 28 (our Old Testament lesson). Nathanael will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Jesus’ disciples have joined the ranks of those who believe God’s covenant promises, and who are called by God to shape redemptive history. The meaning of this vision will become clearer and clearer to the disciples during their three years with Jesus. Although many interpreters see the ladder in Jacob’s vision as symbolic of the cross, Jesus never mentions the ladder in his dialogue with Nathanael. What Nathanael and the others will see is angels ascending and descending upon Jesus, just as the angels did upon Jacob.

Jesus is saying that the disciples will be given divine confirmation that he is Israel’s Messiah, and that even as every Jew acknowledged that Jacob (one of Israel’s great patriarchs) was the Father of Israel’s twelve tribes, so too Jesus has been appointed by God to be the new Israel. Jacob established Beth-El as the house of God, but now Jacob’s Beth-El has been superceded by Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, the mysterious figure of Daniel 7. No longer will there be holy places, like Bethel or the Jerusalem temple, because Jesus himself will render all “holy” places obsolete. Anointed by the Holy Spirit, Jesus himself is that holy place (and true temple) where angels ascend and descend. This is confirmation of Jesus’ heavenly origin and divine authority and power. Jesus has descended from heaven in his incarnation, and he will ascend to heaven after his death and resurrection.

And although this was not yet clear, nor understood by Andrew, John, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael, one day Jesus’ disciples will supercede the twelve tribes of Israel. The coming of this man whose invitation they have accepted, “to come and see” will change the entire course of redemptive history. They “will see” exactly as Jesus promised them that they would.

The theme of this section of John’s gospel is “bearing witness.” The “witness bearing” or “good news” about the person and work of Jesus is followed by the invitation to “come and see.” John the Baptist bears witness about Jesus to Andrew and John, who become followers of Jesus after seeing for themselves. Andrew goes to Peter, and then to Philip and tells him “follow me,” to “come and see” for yourself if Jesus is who Andrew says he is. Philip does exactly that. And when Philip is in turn convinced that *“we have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph,”* Philip then witnessed to Nathanael, and then urged him to “follow me,” to “come and see.” Nathanael does so, and he too believes and he confesses that Jesus is the Christ.

The pattern set out by John is clear. Jesus’ disciples are called to bear witness about the Lamb of God, the Son of God, and Israel’s Messiah. Those who hear this witness are urged to follow the witness-

bearer to “come and see” for themselves. While the Reformed believe that preaching is the primary means of evangelism, there is no doubt that “witness bearing” by each of Jesus’s disciples to their friends, family, and acquaintances is a very effective means of evangelism. Jesus calls all of us to do this wherever and whenever possible. If you are a disciple of Jesus, you to be a “witness bearer.”

So, in light of this, I say to you, “Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” He is the word made flesh who dwelt among us. He is the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah. He invites each of us to “come and see” that his claims are true. So I say to you, “follow me.” “Come and see.” Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.