

Follow Me

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Preacher: Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] Well tonight I'd like us to turn back to the passage that we read in Mark chapter 1. We can focus, we can read again at verse 14. Now after John was arrested Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel.

Passing alongside the sea of Galilee he saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net into the sea for they were fishermen and Jesus said to them follow me and I will make you become fishers of men and immediately they left their nets and followed him.

And I want us to focus especially just on the short but crucial command of verse 17 where Jesus says, follow me. We're at the beginning of a new year which is always a time to stop and think, to reflect on how the last year has gone and to plan ahead for the year to come.

We think about what we want to prioritise, what we're going to pursue, what we hope for. In many ways we're asking the question, what path are we going to follow in the year ahead?

And that's why this is a key time and an important time to be reminded of Jesus's words, follow me. This has been the theme that we've been looking at over at the weekend away.

[1 : 2 8] I didn't actually know that when I was preparing this sermon but Ali Sule who was the speaker at the weekend away emphasised this theme that at the beginning of a year we want to think about who Jesus is, about what difference he has made to the world and to us and what it means for us.

To follow him. So for us tonight it's a chance for those of us who are at the weekend away to just think this through a little bit more and for those of you who weren't there it's just as important for you to consider what this means for you when Jesus says, follow me. It's a really simple command, it's just two words, but behind those two words lie some of the most important matters that we could ever consider. When you're young you know maybe you have the game and people say, oh follow me, you know and it's quite a casual sort of expression, maybe somebody's off to a shop or off to play a game and you think oh yeah I'll follow for a wee while and in that context follow me is just a pretty insignificant thing really. But when Jesus says follow me, it's a matter of life and death and it's incredibly important for us to think about what it means. So when he says these words follow me, what exactly is he saying? Well that's what I want us to think about a wee bit tonight and in many ways I want us to unpack what lies behind these two little words and we're going to say three pretty simple things. First thing we're going to say is that when Jesus says follow me he is saying stop going down the path that you are currently on. He's saying stop going the way that you're going and follow me instead. So this call is a call to a different path, to leave one and to step on to another and Jesus uses a key word to describe what this looks like and it's a word that really lies at the heart of the Christian faith and it's there in verse 15.

He says the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent. Now that word repent is an immensely important word for Christians. It basically means to turn around and to change your thinking. We want to stop going in one direction and to start going in another. So whenever you hear that word repent I want you to simply imagine walking along and turning around and going the opposite way. That's really what the word means and it's really setting before us the great choice that Jesus presents to us that we can either follow a path that will lead us away from him or we can turn around and follow him and ultimately these are the only two choices that we have. Later on in Jesus' ministry he uses a very vivid image to describe this choice between not following him and following him. He describes it in terms of two ways, one that's broad and one that's narrow. We have that in Matthew chapter 7. He says enter by the narrow gate for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction. Those who enter by it are many for the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life and those who find it are few. And that's really the choice that Jesus presents us with, follow him or don't follow him. Now when you think, when you look at that image there and think of this broad gate and path or this narrow gate and path what kind of image comes into your mind? Well I googled it which is always a good way to find out anything and you tend to see a picture like this don't you? So you've got a broad path going one way and you can see that it's leading to destruction and then you can see just off it you've got a narrow path leading to life and I'm sure you've maybe seen many images that look a little bit like that. I'm not convinced that that picture is completely right. It is true in a sense there's a true sense we have a broad path that we're on or a narrow path that we can choose but I think that there's a little bit more to it than that. I think it's better to think of the broad path like this okay so there's a broad path it's going in one direction okay. The narrow path looks like this. It goes in the complete opposite direction so it's not so much standing at a junction where you can go one way or go the other way it's whereby we are all going down one path and we need to turn around and go in the opposite direction. We need in other words to turn against the tide to turn away from the the push and pressure of the world that's leading us away from Jesus that's pushing us pushing us pushing us down a path that leads to destruction. We need to repent we need to turn around and this is where we see one of the the great tragedies of humanity. People are on this broad path in life and people think that true peace and true happiness and true fulfillment is just a little bit further down that path so you think well if I can just get the kind of job I want

if I can just get a bit further down the path till I'm earning a wee bit more or if I can get a bit further down the path till I'm living in the kind of place that I want or if I'm in the relationship that I want or if I can get a bit further down the path till I retire and I don't have the pressure of work and I can relax. Fulfillment is just a wee bit further down the path that's what we constantly think but it's not true. True fulfillment and true peace doesn't come from getting a bit further down the path it comes from turning around and going the other way. That of course means that following Jesus means that there has to be a change. Now that word change is a word that can sometimes make us feel very uncomfortable and when it comes to the idea of following Jesus and you think of the change that it's going to make in your life it's very easy to think that the word change is a synonym for the word spoil. So it's going to spoil your lifestyle it's going to spoil your priorities. We had two brilliant speakers last night at the weekend away. One was Georgie

Armstrong who spoke about the process in which she became a Christian she said her older sister became a Christian she said when my older sister became a Christian I thought it was social suicide which I thought was a great expression she just thought it's going to wreck her life we can think that change means spoil. That's one of the many many lies that the devil tries to tell us because in Christian discipleship change does not mean spoil change means improve. It means improved friendships that are deeper than just a superficial acquaintance or just trying to get a benefit from knowing others or being in a certain circle of friends. It's an improved understanding of life where you can actually look out over life you can look out over people see all the different people in Edinburgh from the people who are at the top of the ladder to the people who are really struggling you can look at them all and think and know that they are people who are loved by God and who are made in his image that's a far better understanding of life and it means improved priorities whereby we start chasing after the things that really matter not the things that will leave us empty. In all of that Jesus isn't calling us to abandon the good stuff in our lives it's easy to think that

[11 : 04] Jesus is saying oh give up everything it's not saying that at all Jesus is calling us to a new path that makes the best of things even better but the biggest improvement of all comes in ourselves so I could say to you well if you become a Christian you'll have better friends you'll have better employment you'll have better connections in life you'll know better people that's not through at all the key point is not that you'll get better friends the key point is that you will become a better friend you'll become a better wife or husband father mother or child you'll become a better employee you will change for the better and other people will see the amazing difference that that will make and one of the key things that brings that change is that following Jesus gives us a new sense of purpose you see that in this passage for these people James and John and Simon and Andrew who followed Jesus he said to them follow me and I will make you become fishers of men there's a very famous verse in the Bible Jesus calls these disciples they were fishermen they said follow that follow me and I will make you become fishers of men that's a passage that we can often associate with ministers I remember hearing one of one of my favorite preachers from my younger days Kenneth Stewart saying that when he was thinking about a call for the ministry this word this verse spoke to him very powerfully that he would become a fisher of men and I think that that's absolutely true but is this verse just for ministers like me or is it just for Christian workers is it just for missionaries the people who go out and who work full time to be fishers of men is it just for them I don't think so I think it's true for all disciples it's true for all of you that when Jesus called you to follow him he's calling you to be a fisher of men and women as well why is that well it's because if we are walking that path that goes against the tide it means that all around us there are people who are going the wrong way and who need to be saved and isn't that true of your life you go to work tomorrow you're going to be surrounded by people who are just waltzing down that broad path and God needs you among them in order to reach them the key point is that no one is standing still that's why I'm a bit iffy about this picture because it kind of gives the impression that you can sort of well you can think well I'll just stand on the grass in the middle and see what happens and it's easy to think that you know well in terms of my relationship with God I just want to stay on neutral ground just now and I'll maybe make a decision further down the line it's absolutely vital that you recognize that there is no neutral ground and that's why although my picture is much more basic and blocky I prefer it because you're either you're either on that path that is pulling you along to destruction or you're

following Jesus surrounded by people who need to be saved all of this means that there are people all around us in the week ahead in the year ahead who desperately need to be called to follow Jesus it's utterly vital that humanity gets fished I don't that's the right way of saying it but humanity needs to be fished by God's people in every part of my life as a disciple and in your life if you are a disciple you are there to fish you're there to reach out for others so how do we fish what do you need for fishing I'm actually not much of a fisherman to be honest but I know the basics what do you need well you need bait don't you why does a fish go to bait why if you put bait in the water as a fish go because it's attractive isn't it and one thing that disciples of Jesus must always be is attractive not in the sense of being flashy and good-looking but in the sense of a quality of character that people will look at and notice and think there is something different about that man or about that woman there needs to be bait you also need to cast when you're fishing don't you so these disciples were casting their net into the sea I think of a fishing rod when you cast your line into the sea all that's doing is making contact and as disciples we need to do exactly the same we have to have some contact with the world around us again that's why I like this picture because you're right in the thick of it you're right in the thick of a thick of a massive crowd heading towards destruction and we need to constantly be making contact with them and one thing is for certain is that we were very unlikely to make contact with them in this building we're gonna make contact with them at your job tomorrow we're gonna make contact with them when you do the school run we're gonna make contact with them when you involve yourselves in the communities in which you live and that contact is absolutely crucial in order to fish you need bait you need to be attractive to people you need to cast you need to make contact and then there's one final thing that you must do and this is the hardest part of fishing you have to wait and wait and wait and maybe you spent the whole of 2019 praying for a friend or a colleague and maybe you feel like giving up don't keep going keep loving that person keep praying for that person keep on going because one thing any fisherman will tell you is that it's not a fast sport it takes time but you've got to persevere so Jesus is saying stop going down the road that you're going on turn around follow me what do we need to do we need to go for it and follow him the second thing that Jesus is saying to us when he says follow me is he's saying and well there's three sub things to this he's saying listen to me trust me and obey me and we'll just unpack that a wee bit for a moment think about the things that you follow in life what kind of stuff when we use that word follow what do we use that word for

well we'll say we'll say we'll follow instructions so my son got a got a massive box of Technic Lego for Christmas we're gonna have to follow the instructions in order to put it together you have to follow a map so we were up in Perthshire for the weekend away didn't know the way had to follow the map on our phone and also we would maybe say that we were following a treatment and so supposedly you had an injury or an illness you'd maybe follow a course of treatment in order to be made to be made better all of these are examples of following and each of these involves listening trusting and obeying so you want to follow instructions you've got to listen to what they say you've got a trust that that they're actually giving you accurate directions and then you actually have to put the bits together in the way that it tells you otherwise the whole exercise is pointless if you're following a map or if you're listening to the sat nav you have to listen to what it says trust that when it says turn right you should turn right I just pointed left but anyway and you have to then obey what it says and especially if you're following treatment if you go to the doctor you have to listen to what he says and you have to trust that he says if you do this so supposedly you've had angina and he says you need to start walking for half an hour a day and you need to cut back on the saturated fat and the cholesterol in your diet you need to trust that that's going to help you and then of course you have to actually do it if it's going to have any effect these three things listen trust and obey all go together in terms of following and so I tried to think of a really profound illustration which would sum this up the fact that these three things go together and the best thing that I could think of was a sandwich because in a sandwich you've got three things that must go together without each bit it's not a sandwich so if you don't have the bread then you just got jam or ham or whatever it is that's in the middle if you don't have the top all you've got is raw toast and if you don't have the bottom all you've got is raw toast fallen on the floor but if you have all three bits you have a sandwich and I think that that's very true in terms of what it means to follow Jesus listening without trust it's just skepticism isn't it I've listened to a lot of things that's been have been said by our politicians in recent years I'm generally opting for skepticism rather than trust in terms of my response to that trusting without listening is just a gamble isn't it trusting without obeying is it's really just a half-heartedness it's not really trusting at all but obeying without trust is just slavery you just doing stuff for the sake of it in order to follow you need all three of these and they're emphasized for us very strongly in the life and ministry of Jesus we must listen to him if we're going to follow him we saw that in verse 21 it said that Jesus after he had called these disciples he went into Capernaum what did he do he immediately went into the synagogue and was teaching and that's a key role that Jesus has in their lives he is our teacher the disciples would have literally

walked behind him listening to the teaching that he was giving it's a great reminder that discipleship is always a call to listen learn and think that was one of the things that we tried to emphasize last last autumn for those of you who weren't here we worked through a series on discipleship which was based around the image of a tree and one of the points that we wanted to emphasize was that as disciples we are learning and growing together we must listen to Jesus we must think about what he says we must make sure that we grasp and understand his teaching but that alone is not enough there needs to be trust and Jesus himself emphasized this when he said the time is fulfilled the kingdom of God is at hand repent and believe in the gospel and so in asking us to turn around Jesus is also asking us to trust him to believe what he is saying and it's it's important that we recognize that this goes beyond just intellectual awareness you can listen to what I'm saying you can listen to what the Bible says and not trust it you could even know it in in great detail and you could even have a high regard for it but still not trust it because trust involves commitment one of the one of the one of the ways I find really helpful to think about trust is to think in terms of leaning if you lean on something if you put your weight on something you are committing yourself to trust that whatever you're leaning on is going to be strong enough to sustain you and uphold you it's a great image for what Jesus is asking us to do he's not saying

I want you to know about my offer of salvation he's saying I actually want you to lean on that and depend on it with your whole heart but from that it has to have a practical effect on the way that we live and that's why obedience is the natural outworking of our trust in Jesus this again is emphasized for us in the passage that we have before us as we said Jesus went into the synagogue he began to teach and in verse 22 which was the last verse we read it said they were astonished at his teaching for he taught them as one who had authority and not as the scribes and this is one of the key emphasis in Mark's gospel that Jesus himself has authority as he entered into his ministry he was confronted by opposition he repeatedly displayed his authority over those who opposed him and in his confrontation with the kingdom of evil in terms of helping people who were sick blind lame he healed them again demonstrating his authority in order to heal and to perform miracles that doesn't make Jesus a slave driver and he's the exact opposite of the kind of leader who's saying you must do this you must do that you must do the next thing if you want to have any sort of relationship with me but what it is telling us is that his that he is worthy of our trust so much so that we're not just saying on the inside oh yeah I believe what you're saying but we're actually saying I want to shape every part of my life according to what you are saying to me listening trusting and obeying all go together if we're going to follow for you in the week ahead and in the year ahead many people will be calling you to listen to them many will be calling for your trust and often we have very little knowledge as to whether what people are saying to us is trustworthy or not many people will be calling for your obedience to do certain things in a certain way the crucial question you have to ask and I have to ask is who are we going to follow and it's impossible to escape that question we're all following someone whether we think about it or not when Jesus says follow me he is saying I want you to listen to me I want you to trust me and I want you to obey me there's one final thing though that Jesus says to us when he says follow me we started off by saying that he's saying don't don't go down the path that you're on anymore secondly we said that he's calling us to trust to listen to him to trust him and obey him but thirdly when Jesus says follow me he is saying to you and to everyone who trusts in him he's saying where I go you are coming with me and when we think about that we have to think about the journey that Jesus took in his life and we often think of the the life of Jesus Christmas we've

[29 : 07] thought about Jesus being born he then enters into adulthood he has this relatively short ministry of about three years and then we have the cross and the resurrection and these key events this is the great journey that Jesus went on and when Jesus says follow me he is saying you're coming with me on that journey now what do I mean by that well we summarized this journey that Jesus took under two headings and they're there before you we call it his humiliation and his exaltation and when we say humiliation we don't mean it in the idea of being embarrassed we mean the idea of being made low which is what it really means to be humble that's why there's a downward arrow and then an upward arrow which is the opposite and that's exactly what Jesus's journey was Jesus didn't come into existence when he was born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago Jesus has always existed the key change that took place at his birth was that he became a human like us and that involved if you like a step down from heaven into our world our experience and into our status that's the first step he then enters into his ministry which we read about which began with this great call to follow me but Jesus the path that Jesus took wasn't a smooth one and if you were to go home and to read through the rest of Mark you wouldn't be reading about like somebody's rise to stardom often if you if you pick up a biography you'll maybe read about how somebody worked their way up to the top of a business or worked their way up into become a global superstar or a president or whatever that's not the kind of biography that

Mark is going to give you at all what he's actually going to tell you about this how Jesus was opposed betrayed and ultimately rejected and it can often be the sense in which there can often be a sense in which we follow Jesus on that journey he's become one of us that is incarnation in his ministry he says follow me so we start following him and for us that can lead to the path of opposition and Jesus makes that a reality that that sometimes being a Christian means that people will oppose us and there's never a guarantee that it's going to make life all rosy sometimes there's suffering and difficulty and for some people they follow Jesus all the way to death for their faith and that's been through of many Christians throughout the history of the church there is a sense in which Jesus Jesus's journey can become our journey but what about the rest of the journey after that comes Jesus's resurrection and his ascension and his return to heaven do we follow him on that journey too right we do and this is one of the great emphasis of the Christian faith in fact this is really what lies at the heart of the Christian faith it's not that Jesus is a leader or a kind of guru who's sort of path and lifestyle and experience we follow it's not what

Christianity is about at all what lies at the heart of Christianity is that if we trust in him we are united to him and that union with Christ means that all the steps of his journey include us in other words where he goes we're going with him and that's emphasized for us throughout the Bible there's a great passage in Romans chapter 6 which I'll just read and then we'll explain a little bit more about what this means when we come to it he says do you not know that all of us who've been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death we were buried there for with him by baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father we too might walk in newness of life for if we've been united with him in a death like his we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his we know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin for the one who has died who's been set free from sin now if we have died with Christ so when we see that word death in the diagram his death if we have died with him we believe that we will also live with him we know that Christ been raised from the dead will never die again death no longer has dominion over him for the death he died to sin once for all but the life he lives he lives to God so you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus so that means that when we say that we're following Jesus to the path of death we don't actually mean that that's that we might have to die for our faith one day which many people have and and that's an immensely precious thing but above that lies the truth which is true for every

Christian that when Jesus died on the cross he took us with him he took us with him in the sense that he took our sin upon himself and the death he died he died in our place and he died for us and the same is true of all the next steps in his journey after death comes resurrection Jesus is raised to new life and if we are united to him we are raised to new life as well after that Jesus was ascended into heaven he's now exalted at the right hand of God and in the future he will come that should say consummation or doesn't say on my screen he will come to consummate his kingdom where every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord we have this amazing picture of Jesus dying on the cross rising again being brought up to his father in heaven having that special place and status with God in heaven and looking forward to the future where he will come and restore all things and be king and head of it all as he restores the universe and creates a beautiful kingdom and when Jesus says follow me he says when I do all that

I'm taking you with me so when I go to the cross and die I'm taking your sin with you with me when I rise from the dead I'm giving you new life as well when I ascend and exalt at the right hand of the father it means that I'm going to prepare a place for you and when I come and my kingdom is consummated when I celebrate that great moment when death and evil are defeated when that great feast is set before us when the great marriage supper of Jesus Christ the Lamb of God is taking place you're gonna be there and you're not there as a spectator or as an outsider but you are there as Jesus is beloved bride the one who he is going to love forever and so when Jesus says follow me he's saying I'm going on a journey and I'm taking you with me and this is what makes

[37 : 43] Jesus different from all other leaders in the world if you think about it in the world it's the followers that ultimately make the leader special isn't it so if you want somebody to be really somebody's gonna be really famous on Facebook what do they need? Billions of followers if someone's gonna be a big YouTuber he needs zillions of subscribers if a politician is gonna be elected he needs lots of people to follow him and vote for him in the world it's the followers that make the leader special whether it's the fans of the pop star whether it's the activists for the political leader whatever it is it's the followers that make the leader special and when the followers stop following the person stops being special isn't that true? In the world it's the followers that make the leader special in the gospel it's the opposite in the gospel you have the leader making the followers special you have a leader coming looking for you and for everyone else who's on that broad path you have the leader delighting in you for who you are and what you mean for him you have the leader dying for the followers not the followers dying for the leader you have the leader bringing you into his own family you have the leader loving and protecting and cherishing you forever never forget that Jesus doesn't need followers to be famous he is

God already he doesn't need a party of activists or anything like that he has all the status in and of himself he comes after you not to make him special but because he wants to make you special and he wants you to be with him forever when Jesus says follow me ultimately he's not saying do what I tell you ultimately he's saying you're coming with me and that brings us back to his great command follow me and I suppose the final question you just have to ask is what's your next step because in following Jesus there's always a next step if you're not following him yet then the next step is to start if you are following him the next step is to continue serving him to involve yourself in the life of the church and in the life of people around you so that you can serve him if you're already serving the next step might be to step into a leadership role and to take responsibility or maybe you've served him for many many many years and maybe you're near the end of your own journey your next step will be to go home what's your next step I mean let's pray Lord Jesus we thank you for the fact that you're calling us to follow you that you're calling us to turn away from a path that's not worth going down that you've given us words that we can listen to and trust and obey and that ultimately you've gone before us as the pioneer and as the first fruits and you've gone down a path and you're bringing us with you we thank you for that so much we pray that in every part of our lives we would follow you Amen