

Follow the Lord

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. It is great to be back after some annual leave, particularly great to be back with the full team compliment back as well after annual leave, and the Freestones are back after long service leave since sometime in December, a while ago now.

And also summer camp last week was fantastic. So thanks, Ash, for the update on that. It was a huge time. And if you were at summer camp last week, then you'll notice that this passage was one of the passages that I preached on.

So that helped me as my preparation for this week. But hopefully it'll remind you of a few things. I want to launch in by praying because this is Vision Series.

Every year I'm excited about Vision Series. I buy a new shirt for Vision Series every year. I've been doing it for 13 years. So I'm ready to kick off and look at where God's taking us in the next five years.

So let's pray and we'll launch into that. Gracious God, we thank you for this opportunity for us as a church to think about the things of where you might be leading us because we're looking in the past and what you have commanded us to do.

[1 : 20] Lord, we pray that throughout this term and even this day, that you would captivate each one of our lives so that we are more dusty from the dust of Jesus' feet.

And we ask it for your glory. Amen. So as I've indicated, this is a very important term for us at St. Paul's. After closing out 11 years of Vision 2020, at the end of last year, we're launching into this new stage of ministry and life together here at St. Paul's with Follow 25.

You've got a copy on your seats of Follow 25 in our strategic plan. It's a shift in our ministry culture to the deliberate development of disciples, all of life disciples of Jesus by the end of 2025.

And if one of the pages, you'll notice what is the big, hairy, audacious goal. And that is for 65%, it's towards the back of it, 65% of St. Paul's identifying much growth in faith through this church.

It is my understanding that no church can do that or has done that or is currently doing that. So that's why it's a big, hairy, audacious goal.

[2 : 42] And if there are a very small number of churches that are deliberately developing disciples in that kind of way, certainly in the Western world, that's our big, hairy, audacious goal, which means this plan is not just, well, let's just work a bit harder what we're already doing.

Every vision, every ministry strategy means there must be some form of change in the way we behave. And so this one here is no different.

Whatever stage of the journey you are on with Jesus right now, whether you are a not yet follower of Jesus through to someone who has been a lifelong follower of Jesus, our goal here is for the vast majority of us being able to self-identify that I am moving forward and grasping more of Jesus as he's grasping more of me.

So in our preaching this term, we're taking a sweeping look at Christian discipleship. Things like it's the foundation of it, the resources for it, and what it looks like in practice.

We're going to refine the strategic plan and commit to it by the end of the term. We're going to pledge our resources to seeing it realized. There's a raise a bunch of money by the end of the term to see discipleship amongst our next generation flourish and just a range of other stuff.

[4 : 14] So today we're looking at the key foundation of Christian discipleship. And if you've got the St. Paul's app in front of you, I want to encourage you to open that up and follow along with the outline.

There's really two main points here for us to see that being a Christian, being a disciple, means that we are following the Lord and secondly, we are following the crucified Lord.

So following the Lord first of all. The word disciple used in Christian circles nowadays mainly is a word that was not coined by Jesus himself.

It's not a uniquely Christian term. John the Baptist had disciples, Pharisees had the disciples, Greek philosophers had their disciples, Jewish rabbis had their disciples.

It was common word in Greek and Roman empires. And the word disciple literally means to be a student, to be a learner. That's its core meaning.

[5 : 19] In the Jewish context, a disciple would take the posture of sitting and learning from their teacher, sitting at the feet of their teacher and learning from them, not just a set of doctrines, but all of life.

But also, that disciple would follow closely as they watched their teacher live all of life.

And so the saying that a disciple should become dusty with the dust of their rabbi was a Jewish saying in the first century.

That is, they are to follow them so closely in all of life that they would be covered in the dust stirred up from the feet of their teacher as they walked.

Now, one notable thing about the disciple-teacher relationship in Jewish tradition is that the disciples chose their teacher.

[6 : 27] Disciples chose their rabbis. The Christian, however, is chosen and called by Jesus. From the moment his public ministry commenced, Jesus called disciples to leave everything, your family, your fishing nets, and follow me.

And from those early, early disciples, those fishermen, tax collectors, he has changed the world.

And he continues to call people from every tribe, language, nation, and people to follow him today.

So who is it that has the authority to call people to leave everything and fully align themselves to him?

Who is it that the Christian follows? That's the question. That's the question posed in front of us in Mark 8. Who do you say I am is the question that Jesus asked his closest followers.

But before he asked that question, he asked them another question. Who do others say I am?

What's the general consensus out there about who I am?

[7 : 54] Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, is undoubtedly the most popular, the most recognized, the most quoted, the most admired, and the most controversial figure in all of the history of humanity and human society.

No other person has been more scrutinized, more studied than Jesus of Nazareth, ever. No one. Entire philosophies and religions have been founded on his teaching. More books have been written about him than any other person who has ever lived. Every day, his name is spoken more than any other name from affectionate admiration to absent-minded curses and denouncements. The large figures of history have had to acknowledge him. John Lennon couldn't think of anything bigger when he said at the height of their fame that the Beatles were bigger than Jesus. He couldn't think of anything else to name. President George W. Bush cited Jesus as his favorite philosopher.

[9 : 17] The French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte said, Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and myself founded empires, but on what foundation did they rest the creations of our genius?

Upon force, Jesus Christ founded an empire upon love and this hour millions of men would die for him. The Cuban communist dictator Fidel Castro said, I never saw a contradiction between the ideas that sustain me and the ideas that symbol of that extraordinary figure Jesus Christ.

No message has been more used and exploited than Jesus Christ. Politicians grab from him quotable quotes to prop up their political platform.

Every religion in the world too, Christian or not, has to factor to some degree an appraisal of Jesus himself. It might be to honor him as one of God's great prophets or an enlightened man or to reject him as a fraud or to hail him as the king of kings and the savior of the world.

No person is more misunderstood, marginalized and commercialized than Jesus Christ. He's been fictionalized by the last temptation of Christ, humanized by the passion of the Christ and he's been satirized by the Simpsons and South Park.

[10 : 46] Even the Christian church is guilty of marketing Jesus as we have put our own spit on him. He is viewed as either a stern taskmaster or as a moral jellyfish willing to hand our forgiveness and turn a blind eye to anyone who prays a shallow prayer of confession only to live lives devoid of his presence.

Get Jesus wrong, you get discipleship wrong. It is incomprehensible to me that Fidel Castro saw no contradiction between his life and the life of Jesus except that he has put a spin on Jesus that is not true.

He has not engaged to the true Jesus Christ. Who is Jesus? What did he do and what does it mean to follow him? How do we live as committed disciples of Jesus today?

Those are the sorts of questions we're delving into over this term. Now Mark does not want us to be vague about the Christian faith.

He longs that we get an accurate picture of who Jesus is and what he came to do and chapter 8 is the pivotal chapter in this gospel.

[12:13] The disciples finally begin to see who Jesus actually is and in verse 25 Peter answers the big question of the identity of Jesus.

You're the Christ. Peter is using a word that literally means you are the anointed one. The anointed one, the Messiah, the king to end all kings, the king who will put everything right in this world that has gone wrong and when Peter says that Jesus accepts the title.

That is Jesus does not call people to be curious onlookers. Can I say that he doesn't even call people to be converts? He calls them to be disciples.

He calls them to be fully committed followers and the name gives it away Christian. The term was first used in the city of Antioch in Acts chapter 11.

It's part Greek part Latin. It means followers of the Christ. Christ. For the early Christians Christ was so much on the lips of these believers and they lived so like Christ that the pagan city of Antioch said there's no other name but to call them of the name Christ.

[13:45] No other name would do. Christian, disciple, follower, they're all interchangeable words to describe a relationship with Jesus Christ in such a way that he is your Lord and he shapes and impacts every corner of your existence.

And so discipleship speaks of a lifelong journey of following Jesus, 100% dedication to him where he shapes every aspect of you into his image.

However, the one thing that comes out of Jesus' mouth that Peter and he's a spokesman for the disciples that they find appalling and shocking.

Take a look at it with me. Mark 8 verse 31. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teacher of the law and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

He spoke plainly about this and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Jesus says here, the Son of Man must suffer.

[15:08] He picks up the title, the Son of Man, from Daniel chapter 7 in the Old Testament. The Son of Man is a divine Messiah figure who comes with the angels to put everything right that is wrong in this world.

The Messiah suffering, however, to the disciples makes no sense at all. The Messiah was supposed to defeat evil, was supposed to beat injustice and make everything right in the world. How could a Messiah defeat evil by suffering, by dying? How could he do that? Jesus is explicit. he is planning to die, not merely predicting that he would die. This is a voluntary act on his behalf. Peter is offended at this. It is one thing for Jesus to say, I'm going to take up and I'm going to fight this fight, the good fight, but I will be defeated and die.

[16:12] And it's a total another thing to say that in fact the very reason I came is to die. And the moment he says that, Peter begins to condemn Jesus in the strongest possible terms.

You see, ever since Peter was a wee lad in nappies, he was told that the Messiah would come, he would defeat evil and injustice and ascend the throne in Jerusalem and to restore the nation of Israel to its heights.

hearts. And here we have Jesus saying that I am that one, I am the Messiah, I am the king to end all kings, but I have not come to live and rule and reign, but I've come to die.

I have not come to take power, but to lose it. I've not come to rule, but to serve. And that is how I'm going to defeat evil and put everything right.

Jesus says he must suffer. Not that he would suffer. And the word must there controls the entire sentence in such a way that everything in that list must happen.

[17:28] Jesus must suffer. He must be rejected. He must be killed. He must be resurrected. And all of those must must happen if people are to be saved and the world is to be renewed.

Let me give you two reasons. If you're looking on your outline, there's a personal reason and there's a legal reason, legal necessity and a personal necessity as to why Jesus must die.

Firstly, the personal necessity, the personal must. Now, we probably know by now the difference between, you don't have to live long, the difference between fake love and authentic love.

In fake love, our aim is to show some kind of love to another person in order to extract something from them.

And ultimately, it's about our happiness. That is, our love is conditional. We only give it when the other person is affirming us and meeting our needs and filling us up on the inside.

[18 : 43] Fake love never allows itself to be vulnerable. You always have to hold something back in case you need to cut your losses and run. The aim of authentic love is to spend yourself and use yourself for the happiness of the other because your joy is their joy.

I would love to go on a great excursus now about how the definition of marriage, and I'm not talking about same-sex marriage, the definition of marriage has shifted in Western culture to one where love is the primary issue.

Authentic love is unconditional. You give it whether your needs are being met or not. It is radically vulnerable.

You spend everything. You hold nothing back. You give it away. The problem is if you're sitting there now and allowing these words to filter down to a little depth, you will realize that you are incapable of doing that.

That no one is actually fully capable of giving true love. All the time. We desperately need it and want it, but nobody can give it to us.

[20 : 05] Not that we can't give any kind of authentic love, but no one is fully always capable of it. We need to be loved as human beings.

Like we need oxygen and we need water. What every single one of us needs is someone to love us who doesn't need our love back.

Someone who loves us radically, unconditionally, vulnerably, and that person is Jesus. At the baptism of Jesus, earlier in Mark, we see that the very essence of God is mutual love relationship, a relationship where the three persons of the Trinity have forever given to each other love.

self-giving, selfless love. Within himself, God has forever had all the love, all the fulfillment, all the joy that he could possibly ever want.

Which means that Jesus does not need to extract any more love from anyone. He's filled up. He lacks nothing. The only way we get true love is from him.

[21 : 21] The security of Jesus' love enables us to need less and to love others more. True love actually creates more true love.

Jesus must die because without it, this world has nothing to break the cycle of destructive, manipulative, conditional, non-vulnerable love.

Legally, secondly, Jesus must die. It's a legal necessity. When someone wrongs you, a debt is established. Happens in all of life, not just financially, emotionally, psychologically, a debt is established.

So for instance, if you got my phone and you broke, it's alright. If I have my phone up here and I held it up and I said, if you broke my phone, there are only two things that can happen.

You take my phone and you break it, two things can happen at this point. Either I say to you that will be \$1,000, whatever it is, the cost of it, or I can say to you, I forgive you.

[22 : 38] That's the only two options you got. Either you pay for it, or I can say to you, I forgive you. In the first case, you pay the debt.

You've created the wrong, you pay the debt. In the second instance, I pay the debt. That is, the value of the phone doesn't just disappear.

If I choose to forgive you, absorb you of the debt, then I have to pay the debt. Either I have to buy a new phone, or I have to go back to pen and paper and pigeons.

In one way or another, I absorb the debt for your wrong against me if I say I forgive you. And that happens on all levels of life.

If someone robs you of an opportunity or of your happiness or of your reputation or something else, it creates a sense of debt, relational debt. Justice has been violated and a debt has been accrued and there are only two options in that moment.

[23 : 55] You can make them pay by destroying their opportunities, ruining their reputation. You can hope that they suffer or you can ensure that they do.

But there is always a personal toll to that. When you're making them pay off their personal debt to you by suffering, you are becoming like them.

You are doing what done to you. You become harder, you become older, colder and older, and evil wins. The only alternative is to forgive, but it is really hard to forgive.

It is agony to forgive. It is agony to refrain from vengeance. It is agony because you choose to absorb the cost of the debt. You're not trying to get your reputation back by tearing down their reputation.

True forgiveness always requires suffering. Love requires suffering. suffering. It is a nonsense to say, why does God not just go, just forget about it.

[25 : 10] Debt never just vanishes. Either they pay or you pay. It should come as no surprise that God would say the only way that I can forgive the sins of the human race against me is either make them pay or I pay.

either humanity has to pay for its debt of sin in rejecting me, its creator, or I will.

The only way God can pardon us and not judge us is to go to the cross and absorb it himself. And that's why Jesus says I must suffer because if I don't, you do.

If I don't, you do. He is saying that He is the King, the King, but not just like any King you've ever imagined.

He is the King who must die. He is the King who must suffer in order for us to be loved and forgiven and filled up. But He doesn't stop there.

[26 : 15] Following Him means we die too. Let's keep reading verse 34, Mark chapter 8. Then He called the crowd to Him along with His disciples and said, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world and yet forfeit their soul?

Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? What does it mean for us to lose our life for the gospel in order to save it? The word that's translated life there in verse 35 is a word that means your identity, your personality, your selfhood.

It is the things that make you distinctively you. Now Jesus isn't saying there that you need to lose the things that make you distinctively you.

You just need to lose all of who you are. That would make no sense whatsoever. What he is saying is that you don't build your identity on gaining things in this world.

[27 : 22] Verse 36, what good is it for someone to gain the whole world and yet forfeit their soul? Every single culture points to the things and says that if you gain those things, if you acquire those things, if you achieve those things, then you will know that you are truly valuable, that you are truly loved.

You become lovable to others. Traditional cultures say that we have no sense of self unless you gain the respectability and the legacy of family and children.

Individualistic cultures are different. We say that you are a nobody unless you have a fulfilling career that brings you money, reputation and status. Either culture ultimately says the same thing. Your identity, your sense of self-worth is based on performance. It is based on your achievements. If you perform well enough, you will find the love and the approval that you crave and it will fill you up on the inside.

And Jesus says, if you gain the entire world, it won't be enough. No matter what you achieve, no matter what you gain, it's never going to be enough to make you sure that you know who you really are.

[28 : 41] If you build your identity on the fact that someone loves you or you've got a good career, what happens when those things are gone? gone and it will go. Your whole sense of self is gone.

Speak to people who have just retired. God's life. God's life. God's life. God's life. Jesus did not come to convince us to shift from one performance-based identity to another.

He wants us to lose the old self, the old identity and base our sense of worth and value and self on him, what he's achieved for us, the good news of the gospel.

Did you notice that in verse 35? For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. Foundation of Christian discipleship is the good news

of Jesus Christ.

It's the gospel. Christianity is not performance-based except it's based on the performance of Jesus Christ. True gospel, sorry, the gospel is not something we do.

[29 : 53] It's something that God has done for us in Jesus. It is God's grace from the very time you begin to the time you end. We believe, we receive, we live as followers of Jesus in the light of the gospel.

Jesus went to the cross and on the cross he lost his identity so to speak so that we can have one. Once we see that the Son of God doing that for us, loving us like that, we begin to get a strength and assurance and identity that sets us free from our culture's identities.

But no, Peter here when he hears these words from Jesus is furious. He is furious with Jesus because Jesus' suffering is not part of Peter's agenda.

His agenda led from strength to strength and it did not include suffering. suffering. And that unfortunately is one of the major undercurrents of discipleship in the Western world.

We relate to Jesus in exactly the same way. We have our agenda, we have our goal, we have our visions for our lives and we think that it's good to have God on our side.

[31 : 14] Jesus' job is to get me established well in life, to give me the things that are the desires of my heart. What Christian discipleship says that if we have an end and Jesus is the means by achieving that end, then we are using him.

It is just another form of conditional love and it will leave us empty. if we try to negotiate with all will obey you if we're not seeing him as a king.

If Jesus is the king to end all kings, then you cannot come to hear this king negotiating your terms.

We lay down our weapons at his feet. It's essential that we see Jesus Christ as king on the cross.

If we just simply see him as king, then we'll obey him because we have to obey him. but he's the king who went to the cross for us and therefore we can submit to him our love and trust.

He's a good king. Instead of negotiating, we simply say, Lord, whatever you ask, I will do. And whatever you send, I will accept.

[32 : 31] If he has utterly given himself to us, how can we not give ourselves utterly to him? Taking up our cross means that we die to self-determination, we die to self-control, sorry, we die to control of ourselves, over our lives, and we die to using him to achieve our agendas in life.

I love the way C.S. Lewis closes out his book, Mere Christianity, as he describes the life of the disciple.

give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life, and you will save it.

Submit to death, the death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day, and the death of your whole body in the end. Submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life.

Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away is in fact really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead.

[33 : 50] Look out for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look to Christ, and you will find him, and with him everything else thrown in.

The call of Jesus on our lives, if I might use the metaphor again, is that the dust of Jesus covers every single aspect of our being.

no part is untouched by him. And as we journey through this term, I want to ask you to ask him specifically, Jesus, are there any parts in my life that are not covered by your dust, and by your grace, enable me to surrender it to you?

Amen. Amen.