

THE ART OF FOLLOWING

Matthew 4: 12-23

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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HOMER AND JETHRO

If you're my age or older you may remember Homer and Jethro.

They were a comedy team who specialized in country music parodies and satire. They were sometimes referred to as "the thinking man's hillbillies." One of their routines went like this:

HOMER: Jethro, if you was to win the Irish Sweepstakes for two million dollars, would you give me half?

JETHRO: Why, Homer, you're my best and closest friend. You know I would.

HOMER: I do know you would. That's what friendship is all about. *(pause)* Jethro, if you had two big luxurious houses like those ones in the Beverly Hills and I was livin' yonder under the bridge without no home, would you give me one of your big luxurious houses?

JETHRO: Homer, you're my best and closest friend. You know I would.

HOMER: Yessir, we're best friends. Didn't I know you'd say that. *(pause)* Jethro, if you had two prize winnin' Holstein cows and I had nary one, would you give me one of your cows?

JETHRO: Homer, you wouldn't even have to ask. You're my closest friend and you know I would.

HOMER: Jethro, if you had two really great huntin' dogs...

JETHRO: Hold on a minute, Homer. I **GOT** two huntin' dogs.

Homer and Jethro knew that charity is easy to idealize but hard to practice.

I saw a routine like that played out in the area of theology and religion when I was in seminary. The professor, Bob Tannehill, was lecturing on the Gospel of Luke and he had come to the third chapter where we find John the Baptizer's sermon to the people of Jerusalem.

John calls them a brood of vipers and says they're all going to hell. They ask what they can do to be saved and he says: "If you have two coats and your neighbor has none, give one of your coats to your neighbor. And do the same with food." He also admonishes tax collectors to be fair in their tax collecting and soldiers to not extort money from people by threats and intimidation.

Professor Tannehill pointed out that Luke was the only gospel that contained this story about John the Baptizer and, since Luke was the only record of it, it may be an invention or a

tradition from within the Lukan community and not, necessarily, an authentic, historical account of something John actually said.

One of the students in the class rose in angry indignation. How could Professor Tannehill suggest that something in the Bible was not absolutely authentic? How could he imply that this was not the word of God? He accused our professor of everything from heresy to treason for offering the possibility that Luke's account might not be a literal, authentic, historical rendering of something that actually happened.

If you ever met Bob Tannehill, though, you would know that he is not one to be easily ruffled. A smallish, soft-spoken man, his list of credentials and accomplishments is longer than he is tall. His achievements give his words force without the need for volume.

He said, very softly: "So, let me be clear. You hold that the words recorded in the third chapter of the Luke's gospel are, in fact, absolutely true and authentic, to be taken and believed as God's literal word."

The student set his jaw and nodded his head. "That's is absolutely right," he said. "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it."

Professor Tannehill stroked his chin and nodded in thought. "So," he said. "How many coats do you have?"

It is an easy thing to believe the Bible. It is an even easier thing to idealize and idolize it. It is quite another thing to follow it.

Philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard put it in more strident terms. He said: "The matter is quite simple. The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obligated to act accordingly. Take any words from the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get on in the world?"¹

IDEALIZING AND IDOLIZING

The problem, you see, is that it's easier to idealize and idolize Jesus, to admire and worship him, than it is to follow him. So that's what we do.

First, we idealize him. We set him up as an ideal that can never be achieved. We place him so far above us, so high on a pedestal of admiration that we know that we will never be able to do what he did or live like he lived.

Well, that was Jesus, we say. And I'm not Jesus. He was perfect, after all. I can't be expected to be like him.

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, ed. Charles E. Moore (Farmington, PA: Plough, 2002), 86. As quoted by Shane Clairborne in *The Irresistible Revolution*, p. 226.

We make him into a spiritual Jack Nicholas.

Jack is, probably, the best golfer who ever played the game. It has been said by other professional players that when Jack was having a good tournament he would win by ten strokes, but when he was having a bad tournament, he would win by only five strokes.

Most golfers would love to be able to play like Jack Nicholas. But then we look at what it costs to be able to play like that, even if you start off with an ocean of talent.

You have to start playing when you are about three years old. You have to give yourself 100 percent to the game. You have to practice eight to ten hours a day. You have to take lessons and lessons and more lessons. You have to think golf, eat golf, sleep golf. And then, if you have talent, you get to play on your college team. If you do well in college and on the amateur tour and the minor tour maybe, you'll make it to the PGA. Where you can drive yourself to tournaments, sleep in the back of your car, eat at McDonalds and hope to pick up a caddy at each location.

And then, when you've paid your dues, maybe you get good enough to be one of the ranked players so you can wake up early and go out and hit three buckets of balls every day before you tee off. And on and on it goes until we realize that we don't really want to play like Jack Nicholas at all.

What we want to do is admire the way he played the game and go on playing the way we do. We idealize him. That's Jack Nicholas, the ideal in golfing, an ideal that I have neither the talent nor the inclination to achieve for myself, an ideal that is just out of reach for people like me. Normal, semi-talented, quasi-committed, duffers like me.

And that's what we do to Jesus. We admire him and then we count the cost of living our lives the way he lived his and we say, no thank you. Rather than following him and doing as he says and does, we choose to idealize him. We admire the way he lived and then we go right on living the way we always have.

Or we Idolize him. Idolization is idealization taken to its logical extreme.

Instead of admiring him, we worship him. We put his picture on our walls and we speak of him in hushed tones. We affix little statues of him to crosses and hang them in our churches or around our necks. We call to him in prayer. We sing about him in songs old and new. We undertake activities in his name and we invoke his blessing upon them. We tack his name onto the ends of all our prayers.

We talk about our walk with him and our personal relationship with him. We tell stories about him and make dolls and statues of him. In short, we do anything, except follow him.

Famed pianist, Oscar Lavant, used to say that people would say to him, "I'd give anything to be able to play the piano like you do." Then he would say, "Oh, but you can play like I do." Then he would explain to them what it would take – the hours of practice, the years of study,

the lifetime of dedication – and they would become angry and accuse him of being rude. They did want to play like he played; they did not want to pay what he paid.

We all want to admire Jesus, to hold him up as an ideal, to idolize him and worship him. We just don't want to follow him. Because we know where he's going.

FOLLOW ME

The problem is that nowhere in the gospel accounts does Jesus ask anyone, ever to admire him. The phrase, "admire me" does not appear in the New Testament. Neither does "idolize me" or "idealize me."

Jesus uses the phrase "love me" only twice. They both appear in the Gospel of John and are followed by admonitions telling his disciples what to do. **If you love me, keep my commandments. If you love me, feed my sheep.**

The phrase "worship me" appears only three times in the gospels – once in Matthew, once in Mark, once in Luke. And it is not spoken by Jesus. No, it is spoken by Satan as he tries to tempt Jesus.

Jesus asks his followers to believe in him only five times and three of those are in John's gospel. The other two times are in Matthew and Mark.

No, the thing that Jesus asks us to do most often, the commandment that he utters more than any other, twenty times in the four gospels is not "admire me," not "believe in me," not "worship me", or "sing about me," or even "love me," but **FOLLOW ME**."

Follow me. Do as I do. Walk where I walk. Go where I go. Relate as I relate. Talk as I talk. Follow me.

That is the call of the gospel.

Sell all that you have and give it to the poor and come, ***follow me***.

Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.

Follow me, and let the dead bury the dead.

Take up your cross and come, ***follow me***.

And for most of us that's fine as long as we understand it in that safe, detached, metaphorical way.

Again, Kierkegaard puts it in more strident terms: "To want to admire, instead of follow Christ is not an invention of bad people; no, it is more an invention of those who spinelessly want to keep themselves detached at a safe distance from Jesus."²

But it is not to the safe, detached and metaphorical understanding that Jesus calls us. It is, rather, to the frontier of our spiritual lives.

² *Ibid.*

If we follow him, really follow him that means we are going to have to take risks and live life at the edge of our resources – our mental, spiritual, and emotional resources as well as our physical ones.

It means we're going to have to start forgiving those who treat us badly and loving our enemies, even those who would undo us.

It means that we're going to have to be forgiving and self sacrificing. We're going to have to give up some of what we want, what makes us happy, what makes us comfortable and satisfied, for the sake of others. It means we are going to have to invest ourselves in the cause of the poor and the powerless.

If we follow Jesus it means we have to start doing for others with no expectation of getting anything in return. It means we have to start loving people who are hard to love and helping people who may not appreciate our help. It means we have to be willing to suffer falls and failures, defeat and death for the sake of his kingdom.

Following Jesus is a demanding business, to be sure. But it is not all demand. Rewards are promised as well.

If we follow Jesus, scripture tells us, he will lead us to that place where life is more real, more authentic, more vibrant and exciting than we ever imagined possible. Hang gliders and base jumpers will have nothing on us. Mountain climbers, extreme skiers, and dare devils will stand in awe as we pass by.

People of every faith and every nation will point to us and say in wonder: "These are the people of God. These are they who live in the kingdom of everlasting light. These are the ones who truly, truly follow Jesus."

AMEN