

“Leave Everything and Follow Jesus,” Luke 5:1-11 (Last Sunday After Epiphany, March 3, 2019)

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, <sup>2</sup> and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup> Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. <sup>4</sup> And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” <sup>5</sup> And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” <sup>6</sup> And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. <sup>7</sup> They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. <sup>8</sup> But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” <sup>9</sup> For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, <sup>10</sup> and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” <sup>11</sup> And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

## PRAY

We are studying the gospel of Luke this spring in the weeks leading up to Easter, which is now seven weeks away. Lent, the forty-day period of reflection on the gospel which the church has traditionally observed this time of year, begins on Wednesday.

And as we officially move into this time of year I am so thankful that we are looking at these verses at the beginning of Luke 5. As I prepared last week, I prayed several times that God would use this sermon to make some things about Christianity very clear to you. In particular, that God would use this sermon to make it abundantly clear to some of you how it is you become a Christian. And I also prayed that God would make it abundantly clear to some others of you what it takes for you to know that you in fact are already a Christian.

There’s much confusion on these two topics in our society today, but we have the perfect subject to help illuminate them for us – we have the apostle Peter. I’m going to call him Peter throughout the sermon because that’s the name Jesus gave him and the name we’re most familiar with, though he’s mostly referred to as Simon in our text for today.

I need to give you a little background to chapter five as we begin. Jesus had already called Peter, James, John, and some other men to follow him by the time we get to the events recorded in our text. You can read about that in Mark’s gospel. Peter is a part-time follower of Jesus at this time. He still has his fishing enterprise on the Sea of Galilee (which Luke refers to as the lake of Gennesaret). Peter has probably been following Jesus for several months by this point.

In these eleven verses we’ll see three things that happen to Peter, and if these three things happen to you then you will be a Christian. They are: first, you must meet the real Jesus. Second, you must see your sin. Third, you must not fear. Then, there’s a fourth thing, and if this happens in

your life then over time you will become absolutely certain that you are a Christian. You may have doubts now, but one day you will no more. Fourth, you must keep coming back to Jesus.

First, you must meet the real Jesus. We read that Jesus is preaching by the sea. The crowd is so big and coming so close that Jesus has to get into Peter's boat and preach on top of the water.

After he delivers the sermon, Jesus turns to Peter and says, “ ‘Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.’ ”<sup>5</sup> And Simon answered, ‘Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.’ ” Luke 5:4-5.

Peter is a professional fisherman. He's done this all his life. He knows when you can catch fish and when you can't. For whatever reason, the fish just weren't around to be caught that day in that part of the Sea of Galilee. Peter knew this, and he was sure he knew this in a way that a carpenter turned preacher like Jesus did not know this.

Yet, out of respect for Jesus, Peter obeys. He was clearly reluctant, but he did it anyway.

Friends, how do you know when you've met the real Jesus? ***You can know you've met Jesus when you obey him even when you don't think it's a good idea. Even when Jesus offends you.***

Jesus is still really popular in our culture. It's rare to hear someone speak against him. Lots of people say they still want to associate with him. Liberals, conservatives, even atheists and agnostics all speak of their respect for Jesus.

What they'll say is, “Jesus is great, he is to be respected and admired. If everyone would emulate him the world would be a better place. It's the church that's the problem. The church has corrupted the true teaching of Jesus. The real Jesus would be shocked if he heard the things the church teaches under his name.” You'll hear that all the time.

Granted, the church as an institution is far from perfect. Lots of mistakes and not a few atrocities have been committed in the name of Jesus by the institutional church. The church is full of sinners, like you, like me, so the church is an easy target – it's easy to dislike the church.

But when people say, “The church has corrupted the true teaching of Jesus,” what they really mean is, “The church has taught what the Bible actually says about Jesus.” Because that's where their problem is. ***They have a preconceived notion of what Jesus should have said based on their culture and biases.*** What they should say is, “Jesus is great – it's the Bible I can't stand.”

You can say that, but friends when you do you are speaking utter nonsense. All we know about the real Jesus, the actual Jesus, and what he taught comes from the Bible. ***There are no other sources. The real Jesus and the Bible are one.*** There are a few other ancient writers who confirm Jesus' existence, writers like Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, and Josephus, but we only know what actually said because of the Bible. No other record of his life is out there.

So if you say, “I love Jesus, but I don't like what the Bible says about Jesus,” then your Jesus is a figment of your imagination. You have no evidence for your Jesus, you've made him up,

because the only source we have for Jesus is the Bible. And when I say the Bible I don't just mean the gospels. We are not so-called "red letter Christians" at Grace. We meet Jesus in all the rest of the Scriptures as well. Why? Because ***Jesus is on record affirming all of Scripture.***

Jesus was a Bible man. You cut Jesus and he bled Scripture. He was constantly saying, "It is written," *gegraptai!* Some ten percent of all the words we have of Jesus were Old Testament Bible verses he quoted.

In Matthew 5 Jesus goes so far as to say, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota [the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet] not a dot [the smallest stroke you could make with a pen], will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:17-19.

Some people say, "The Jesus I know would never teach this. I know the Bible does, but Jesus would never teach this. He would never say that. He would never call this other thing over here sin." But there is not a shred of intellectual honesty in that kind of statement. They don't want the real Jesus. You know what they want? They want a Stepford Jesus.

Do any of you remember the movie *The Stepford Wives*? The men of Stepford, Connecticut got tired of having wives who talked back to them, who didn't wait on them hand and foot, who didn't do whatever they wanted, so they killed them and replaced them with robots. The robots' response to the men, no matter what the men wanted them to do, was only "Yes, dear; yes, dear."

If you take certain Scriptures and throw them out of your Bible and say, "Jesus couldn't teach this and he couldn't have said that and he couldn't have called this other thing sin," you don't have a real Jesus. You have a Stepford Jesus, a Jesus that just affirms you in all your biases and all your prejudices and never contradicts or offends you. A Jesus that only ever says to you "Yes, dear; yes, dear."

***No, you will only meet the real Jesus when you hear all of what he has to say in the Bible and then obey it, especially when it's hard. Especially when you are reluctant to. Especially when your first response to a clear command is, "This is crazy! There's no way Jesus can expect me to do this!" But you must – there's no other way to meet the real Jesus.***

Second, you must see your sin. Peter obeys Jesus by letting down the nets and fishing, even though they'd fished all night and caught nothing. "And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. <sup>7</sup> They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink." Luke 5:6-7.

Every fish in the sea of Galilee jumps into their nets. How would you expect Peter to react to this catch of fish? ***By celebrating,*** because Peter has won the lottery. You'd think he'd go to Jesus and say, "Rabbi, do I have a deal for you. Just once a month come down to the sea of

Galilee, do your thing with the fish, and we can split the profits and live like kings the rest of our days.”

But that’s not how Peter responds. “But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’”<sup>9</sup> For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken ...” Luke 5:8-9.

Why does Peter respond that way? Years ago R.C. Sproul wrote a great book called *The Holiness of God*. I recommend it highly. One chapter in the book, the chapter in which he writes about Peter and the catch of fish, is called “The Trauma of Holiness.” In that chapter Sproul explains how whenever we get around someone obviously greater than us, more talented or powerful than us, it doesn’t make us feel better about ourselves. **It makes us feel worse.**

If you’ve ever finally gotten to meet someone world famous and whom you admire you know what I’m talking about. You’re about to meet this actor, athlete, musician, politician, but what do you do right before you meet? You check your breath and fix your hair. You make sure you have nothing stuck in your teeth and you make sure your pants were zipped. And the whole time you’re repeating like a mantra, “Do not make a fool out of yourself.”

When you get around someone who is indisputably greater than you are, it doesn’t make you feel good about yourself. It makes you nervous and self-conscious. We call it being “star-struck.”

But how much more so when you meet God? When someone encounters God in the Bible he doesn’t say, “This is great. I’ve been wanting to hang out with you for so long.”

No. When Job meets God in Job 42 he says, “I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” When John meets the Jesus at the beginning of the book of Revelation John “falls on his feet as though dead.” Why? Because *it’s traumatizing to meet God*. Job and John aren’t just star-struck, they are God-struck. They think they’re going to die when they meet the real God.

Maybe the most famous account of God-induced trauma comes from the book of Isaiah. Isaiah has a vision of God on his throne in the temple, high and lifted up. The train of God’s robe filled the temple. The two seraphim, these mighty, six-winged angelic creatures, cried to one another: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is filled with his glory.” The foundations of the temple shook at their voices.

And what did Isaiah say? Did he say, “This is so cool – I’ve always wanted to see this.” No! “<sup>5</sup> And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” Isaiah 6:5. Isaiah says, “I am falling apart. I’m going to die. I can’t survive in the presence of God.”

But why is it so traumatizing to meet the real Jesus? *Because when we meet the real Jesus we experience his holiness and we feel the weight of our sins and failures and we are overwhelmed with the knowledge that **God hates all of them and is determined to destroy them.***

I know that sounds so harsh at first to say, “God hates” anything, but when you think about it you want a God who hates sin. “There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: <sup>17</sup> haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, <sup>18</sup> a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, <sup>19</sup> a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.” Proverbs 6:16-19.

We don’t want a God who loves those things, just like we wouldn’t want a judicial system or a police force who loves those things. We want a God who hates those things.

But the problem comes when you meet the real Jesus and realize, “Oh, no, it’s not that Jesus hates those sins in the abstract. ***He hates those things in me, too.*** I have haughty, proud eyes, and a lying tongue. I have devised wicked plans. I have sown discord among people and there have been times in my life when my feet couldn’t carry me along fast enough to go do something I knew to be wrong.”

That experience can only be described as traumatizing. Meeting the real Jesus is not inspiring. You don’t feel like taking a selfie with the real Jesus. You don’t want to give him knuckles. No, you see your sinfulness and you want to say, “Depart from me, Jesus, for I am a sinful man!”

Has that happened to you? I’m afraid you’re not a Christian until you come to an awareness of your many, many sins. But I want you to know if that’s you ***it’s actually a very safe place to be.***

Because third, then you can get to the point where you do not fear. Peter admits his sins and falls on his face before Jesus. But what does Jesus say to Peter? Does he say, “About time, Peter. About time you groveled before me. About time you recognized my holiness and power and fell on your knees”? Never. Now that’s what a lot of culturally conservative people who call themselves Christians think Jesus should say. There are more than a few churches like this around here. ***I want to take a minute and warn you about them.***

This group of people builds their notion of Christianity on points one and two of the sermon. They are big on meeting the real Jesus and believing every word of the Bible is straight from God and they are big on calling sin “sin”. And of course, as I’ve already said, it’s absolutely necessary to do those things. You must go through points one and two to be a Christian.

The problem comes when you stop at point two. If you stop there you only have a Jesus ***who is angry at you.*** You only have a Jesus who says to you, “You better work harder, you better try harder. If you don’t shape up you’ll never win my approval.” And, friends, we can’t do it. We will never measure up to the holiness of Jesus. It will only crush us under our guilt and shame.

Therefore, you can’t stop at point two. When you see your sins and you are ashamed of them and you feel you can never overcome them, ***you must hear Jesus say something else.*** “And Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid ...’” Luke 5:10b. ***You must hear Jesus say that!***

Now how can a holy Jesus, a perfect, righteous Jesus, say to sinners like us, “Do not be afraid”? How can he say, “God punishes sin, God hates sin, God will destroy all sin including yours, but you don’t have to be afraid of him at all”? Jesus can say that because of his gospel.

The word “gospel” is an old English word which means “good news.” The heart of the good news of Jesus is that he is the Son of God, and he came to earth to live the life you should have lived. You have not lived a perfect life, your life is in fact full of sin. But Jesus lived a perfect life, a holy life in complete obedience and dependence on God. Then, on the cross, he died the death you deserve to die for your sins. He paid the penalty you owe for your sins.

On the cross, God performed perhaps one of the greatest miracles of all time. He took your sins – your past, present, and future sins – and laid them on Jesus. He separated your sins from you, put them on Jesus, then punished Jesus instead of you. Perhaps no verse in the Bible encapsulates the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ like 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

And because God did that, even though you are still a sinner, Jesus can say to you, “Do not be afraid.” Friends, in Jesus Christ God’s love for you will never dim, never fade, never weaken, because God has taken your sins from you, and now you can do nothing to make God love you any more nor can you do anything to make God love you any less.

That’s why you can’t stop at point two of the sermon, you must go all the way to point three: “Do not be afraid.” But if the cultural conservatives just hang out in points one and two, it’s the cultural liberals who call themselves “Christian” who skip all the way to point three. **I need to warn you about them, too.**

All they have is a Jesus who tells them, “Do not fear.” They have a Jesus who just affirms in whatever they do. ***But it’s not the real Jesus with his holy hatred of sin.***

It’s not the real Jesus, and while their Jesus might help you feel good about yourself when life is cruising along pretty well, *when you’ve blown it, when you’ve really messed up your life, when you know you’ve got to change, an only point three Jesus will be no help.* There’s no substance to a Jesus ***who only ever*** says, “Do not be afraid,” ***who only ever*** says, “You’re fine, you’re ok and I’m ok. You just need to love yourself and don’t listen to the haters.” That’s a Jesus straight out of your own imagination and desires, and he is no help because sometimes, as much as you might not want to admit it, the haters are right. Sometimes the people who are frustrated with you and mad at you are right. Sometimes your conscience is crushing you and it should because you’re in sin. Only a real Jesus can help you then.

Do you believe in an all three points Jesus, a full-blooded Jesus from the Bible, who hates sin, but who went to the cross so he could tell you, “Do not be afraid”? Do you trust him? **If so, you are a Christian.** You’re in the family of God. God loves you and nothing will ever change that.

But it’s not always easy, especially early on as you begin to follow this Jesus, to know that you believe in him. It’s easy to have doubts. Now in the sermon I want to address those who agree with that but who would say, “I think I believe in this Jesus, I want to believe in this Jesus, but I’m not sure I do. I have doubts. I’m not sure I’m saved.”

The example of Peter helps us here too. Fourth, you must keep coming back to Jesus. For a long time I was controlled by what I would call the Pauline model of becoming a Christian. Paul, you remember, has a dramatic conversion experience. He's killing Christians and hauling them off to jail and then wham! Damascus Road experience! In just a few days he goes from persecuting Jesus to preaching him! From killing Christ's followers to being one of them himself.

For a long time I thought if you become a Christian it had to be dramatic and you had to know the moment it happened. Now, though, I know there's a second model: the Petrine model of becoming a Christian. We know that Paul became a Christian over the course of a few days recorded in Acts 9. When did Peter become a Christian? Nobody knows! All we can say is that at some point in the New Testament he goes from trusting himself for his salvation to trusting Jesus, but it's impossible to say precisely where it happens.

So, for example, Jesus calls Peter to follow him in Mark 1, but it's not until Luke 5 (probably several months later) that Peter confesses his sin. Then, after a year or more, in Matthew 16, when Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" Peter is the one who replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Matthew 16:17. You read that and you think, "That's where it happened, where Peter became a Christian."

But then you read down just a few verses and Jesus begins to tell the disciples he's going to suffer and be killed, and Peter rebukes Jesus for saying that. "Never, Lord, this shall never happen to you!" And Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." Matthew 16:23. And suddenly you're not so sure about Peter again. Maybe that's not when it happened.

Then, Matthew 17, Peter witnesses the Transfiguration of Jesus, he sees Jesus in all his glory. Surely, Peter believes now! Surely, he's a Christian now. But then when Jesus is tried before the Sanhedrin and Pilate sentences him to die on the cross, Peter, after promising he'd never fall away, denies three times ever knowing Jesus. The rooster crows, and Peter weeps bitterly.

But then, in John 21, after the resurrection, Jesus meets Peter by the Sea of Galilee again and restores Peter. Then just weeks later Peter preaches that great sermon at Pentecost and three thousand people are saved, and you think, "Finally, finally, Peter gets it. He's a Christian now." But then several years later the controversy over the Gentile Christians explodes, and we read in Galatians 2 where Paul says, "But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned." Galatians 2:11. That doesn't sound good.

You say, "When did it happen? When did Peter finally believe?" We don't know, but we do know this: no matter what happened, no matter how he sinned, no matter how often he messed up, **Peter kept coming back to Jesus.** And by the end of his life, he was able to write things like this: "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, <sup>9</sup>obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." 1 Peter 1:8-9. **That sounds like a believer.** And we know that at the end of his life Peter died faithful to Jesus during the Neronian

persecution, crucified upside down because he said, “I do not deserve to be crucified right side up like my savior.”

Peter kept coming back to Jesus, and friends if you think you believe the gospel but you’re just not sure, keep coming back to Jesus. ***But how do you do that?*** You know, it’s important to note that Jesus doesn’t only say to Peter “do not be afraid.” He says to Peter, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” Luke 5:10.

If you want to be sure of your faith don’t try to grow it in isolation. Don’t go into your bedroom and close the door and stare at your navel and try to figure things out by yourself. You need others. This is why the church is important.

You grow in the Lord *in community* with others, so if you want to get rid of your doubts and be sure of the gospel ***then commit yourself to other Christians.*** Commit yourself to pastors and elders who hopefully know what they’re doing and teach you the Bible faithfully so you can meet the real Jesus. Commit to a church **and** commit to telling others about Jesus, because you’ll never grow in your faith like you will when you are trying to bring new people into it, when you are trying to “catch men.” Nothing forces the gospel to go deep into your heart like trying to explain it to others who don’t yet know it.

You say, “J.D., is that wise? Trying to tell others about Jesus before you are really sure yourself?” Absolutely. John Wesley, the great Methodist pastor, was an ordained minister in the Church of England for twelve years before he became a Christian, and at the end of that twelve year period he was a broken man. He had been trying to create his own holiness. He was a two point Christian, and by the end Wesley was so distraught he thought about leaving the ministry.

But he asked a friend of his, a Moravian missionary named Peter Bohler, if he should quit. And Peter Bohler said, “By no means. Preach faith in Christ until you’re sure you have it. Then, because you have it, you will preach faith.”

Keep coming back to Jesus until you have faith. Keep telling others about Jesus. No one ever honestly sought Jesus without finding him. That’s why the church is so important, and that’s why the Lord’s Supper is so important. We invite all believers to participate with us in the Lord’s Supper, whether you’re a member of this church or not. Whether you’ve been baptized or not. Whether you are 100% sure you believe or not. When Christians take the Lord’s Supper we are confessing what saves us is ***Jesus Christ***: his body and blood, represented by the bread and the cup, broken and shed for our sins. Even if you have doubts, keep coming back to the table and asking Jesus for faith until you believe. AMEN