

Sermon Transcript  
September 16, 2012



An Invitation to the Kingdom  
Come and Follow  
Matthew 4:12-25

*This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 16, 2012, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Pastor Scott Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church web-site at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).*

**Scripture Text**  
**Matthew 4:12-25**

<sup>12</sup> Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. <sup>13</sup> And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup> so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

<sup>15</sup> “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,  
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

<sup>16</sup> the people dwelling in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,  
on them a light has dawned.”

<sup>17</sup> From that time Jesus began to preach, saying,  
“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

<sup>18</sup> While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup> And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” <sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup> Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

<sup>23</sup> And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. <sup>24</sup> So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. <sup>25</sup> And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

## Introduction

I am afraid sometimes we read our Bibles the way Leonardo da Vinci painted his masterpieces. You might question, “And what is wrong with that?” Da Vinci, after all was one of the greatest painters of all time. We probably would love to be classified as a “da Vinci” when it came to reading the Bible. You would probably feel pretty good about yourself if someone said of you, “You know he or she is a real “da Vinci” when it comes to reading the Bible.” It sure sounds like a high compliment to me.

One of the paintings da Vinci is most known for is his painting of the *Last Supper*. His masterpiece has had a great influence on our imagination of that scene where Jesus announces to his closest followers that someone has betrayed him. When most of us imagine the scene of the *Last Supper*, our minds quickly conjure up the image painted for us by da Vinci. We can see with our mind’s eye the long white table and Jesus standing in the middle and the expressions of shock and dismay on the faces of the disciples. And yet, here is the problem with his painting. This scene that da Vinci paints for us has been stripped of its Jewish context.

Here is what you will see if you look closely at da Vinci’s painting of the *Last Supper*. First of all, you will notice windows in the background looking out on a sunny mid-afternoon scene, whereas the Passover meal always took place at night. The faces of Jesus and his disciples look like pale-faced Europeans, not Semitic. But most telling of all is what is on the table. Lacking are the essential elements of the Passover celebration including the lamb and unleavened bread. In their place is a puffy loaf of bread, when leavening is strictly forbidden during the week of Passover, and a shockingly unkosher plate of grilled eels garnished with orange slices.<sup>1</sup> Apparently, “grilled eel” was a trendy meal in Italy during the Renaissance period and so somehow it made its way onto our Lord’s table in da Vinci’s rendition of the *Last Supper*. Perhaps da Vinci thought, “if you are going to have one final meal, grilled eel is the way to go!”

No doubt, da Vinci’s goal was to capture the reaction of the disciples at the news that one of them had betrayed their master, Jesus. However, Tverberg writes, “But by not including elements of Passover, a Jewish feast that celebrated God’s redemption and brimmed over with messianic expectations, we miss the fact that Jesus was powerfully proclaiming himself as the fulfillment of God’s ancient promises. Jesus uses the symbols of Passover to point toward his coming atonement to redeem those who believed in him and to inaugurate a “new covenant” for the forgiveness of sin.”<sup>2</sup> If you remove the “Jewish element” from the *Last Supper* you are missing so much of what Jesus is saying about himself. He is “the” Lamb of God who comes to take away the sins of the world. It is the Jewish Passover that helps us understand our own sacrificial

meal Jesus instituted for us the night he was betrayed. The Jewish Passover helps us understand Jesus and the cross.

I am afraid when we read the Bible, and particularly the gospels, we do what da Vinci did when he painted the *Last Supper*. Like da Vinci, we often remove the Jewish element from the passage and we miss so much of the richness of the text. Admittedly, we don't do it on purpose and we do have the challenge of reading these words while being 2,000 years removed from the time and culture of Jesus. But the unfortunate thing is this. When we remove the Jewish element from the narrative we read in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John we end up missing "the heart of the matter."

Our text this morning is one of those passages where you lose something if you strip the passage of its Jewish context. We are still in Matthew 4 this morning. Our text this morning is the same as last week, Matthew 4:12-25. But this morning I want to highlight verses 18-22. It is a passage that really comes to life if you can capture a sense of the Jewish culture of the day. Starting in verse 18 we read, "*While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.'*" *Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*"

Does this passage ever strike you as odd? Here is Jesus calling four of his disciples to follow him. In essence, he is asking them to make a career change. He is asking them to leave the family business and go wherever Jesus goes. It seems like Jesus just happens to show up on the shores of the Sea of Galilee while these two sets of brothers are tending to the family trade and business and he simply says to them, "*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*" Does it surprise you to find these four young men immediately dropping their nets and leaving their families behind and following after Jesus? It reads as though Jesus just shows up out of nowhere and issues this call to these four young men and in almost trance like fashion they drop everything and begin their journey with Jesus. What is up with that? In order to understand what is happening here, you need to become acquainted with Jewish culture and the role of a Jewish rabbi in the life of Israel at the time of Christ.

## **Rabbi Jesus**

Did you know that Jesus was a Jewish rabbi? It was common knowledge. Everyone called Jesus, "rabbi." From the very first day Nathaniel met Jesus in John 1:49, he said

to Jesus, "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God, the King of Israel.*" This was at the very beginning of his earthly ministry. Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to meet with Jesus in the middle of the night addressed him as "Rabbi." Multiple times you hear the disciples calling Jesus, "Rabbi" and Peter uses that title for Jesus in Mark 9 when they are on the Mount of Transfiguration. The blind man who received his sight in Mark 10 and people from among the 5,000 who were fed through the miracle of multiplying fish and bread called Jesus, "Rabbi." Even Judas, which made his kiss of betrayal all the more hurtful, betrayed Jesus with a kiss and the greeting, "Rabbi." I know there are other titles we readily think of when we think of Jesus. When we think of Jesus we tend to think of the titles of "Savior" and "Messiah" and other similar titles. But he was also a "rabbi" and this Jewish title helps us understand what is happening in our passage this morning. The word "rabbi" literally means, "my master" and it was a term of respect for those who taught the Scriptures. I will also submit to you that this title "rabbi" helps us understand what it means for us today to be a disciple of Jesus and what it means for us today to make disciples of Jesus. It is still a relevant title for Jesus.

There was a very strong and active religious culture in Israel during the time of Jesus. For the average Jewish family, by the time a boy in the family was 5 or 6 he would begin studying the Torah. The Torah was made up of the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. By the time that boy became 10 years old he had the entire Torah memorized. From age 11 to 15 the boy would begin to study the "oral law" which was simply the rabbinic interpretations of the Torah passed down through the years. These were teachings and interpretations on the Old Testament Law. I also read in some places that during this time the boy would work on memorizing the rest of the Old Testament.

Most boys ended their formal education at the age of 13 to 15 and were then trained in the family business. It was only the best of the best who would advance beyond 13 to 15 years of age to continue their studies in the synagogue. Boys who went on to further their studies would continue their study of religious matters. It would be at this point that the brightest of all would apply to study under a rabbi and the rabbi would test the potential disciple to see if he was capable of both receiving his instruction and potentially passing it on to others. If the student passed the rabbi's test and was deemed worthy to be his disciple, the rabbi would invite the student to be his disciple and call him to follow him. That would mean literally "walking after" him. He would leave everything he had and his family and follow in the steps of the rabbi. There was a saying back then that the disciple would "cover himself in the dust of his rabbi."<sup>3</sup> This would mean that the disciple would travel where the rabbi traveled and the dust that covered the rabbi would also cover the disciple. That is how closely the disciple would follow his rabbi.

When we hear the word “instruction” we have a very Western understanding of what “instruction” looks like. When we think of “instruction” we think of a classroom and a text book and the passing on of information to the student. But the “instruction” that came from the rabbi was different than our Western minds are used to. The focus of instruction that came from the rabbi centered around the Torah and the rabbi sought to pass his interpretation of the Torah, that is the Old Testament Law, to his disciples. His goal was not to simply pass on information about the Torah. But his focus was to pass on how to live out the Torah and how to apply God’s laws to life. The rabbi was inviting his disciples to a way of life. A rabbi’s interpretation of the Torah was called *halakhah*, which meant “how to walk by God’s Word.”<sup>4</sup> The disciple would learn how to live out the rabbi’s teaching by listening to what he said and by watching how he lived. The rabbi became a living example of what it means to apply God’s Word. And so the disciple became a student of both the Torah and the life of the rabbi. The instruction was centered around teaching the disciple a “way of life.”

There is one more thing I want you to understand about the relationship between the rabbi and the disciple. The ultimate goal of the time spent with a rabbi was that the disciple would eventually take the teachings of the rabbi and his way of life and then pass them on to others. The disciple would train under the rabbi until about the age of 30 and then would be released to go and do likewise.

**“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”**

So let me read our passage again for you and follow along with me as I read it. I wonder what new insights you have now that we have considered the Jewish context in which this invitation was given. *“While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.”* I wish we were in a setting where I could hear what you are seeing that perhaps you didn’t see the first time I read it. So let me give you some of my thoughts and observations of what I now see given the Jewish culture behind the text that I didn’t see before.

It is not a strange invitation but a humble privilege: Knowing what I know now about the Jewish culture and the role of the rabbi, all of a sudden I see this scene with new eyes. For a disciple to drop everything to follow the rabbi is not something out of the norm. This is how disciples followed rabbis. It made perfect sense in the culture.

Now here is something to wonder about and to ponder. If Peter and Andrew and if James and John were tending to the family business and family trade, what does that say about them? I think it would be reasonable to conclude that as they were making their way through the “educational system” of the synagogue that at some point along the way, around the ages of 13-15, someone in the synagogue came to them and lovingly put their arm around them and suggested they pursue a career in the family business. In other words, they were not among the “best of the best.”

It is interesting in Acts 4, you find two of these disciples, Peter and John, standing before the Jewish Council because they were out there telling everyone that their rabbi was the Messiah and he actually had risen from the dead. Listen to what it says in Acts 4:13. “*Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished.*” They didn’t make it far in the system. But then listen to what it says. “*And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.*” They recognized that they had followed the rabbi Jesus and therefore were able to speak with boldness and authority because of the influence of their rabbi.

So when I now read this passage in Matthew 4:18-22 and hear Jesus extend the invitation “*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*” I see a rabbi calling on these fishermen and offering them what the Jewish culture considered the “cream of the crop.” It would be like today, if someone showed up at the local family business and held in his hand a full ride to Harvard, most likely the son or daughter would drop everything and forge a new path. I used to wonder if Zebedee was rather “ticked” at his boys for following this “unknown traveling preacher” on the drop of a dime. But now I wonder if he looked at his humble boys with a measure of fatherly pride. A rabbi has come and found my boys worthy and called my boys to follow. Normally a disciple would have to apply to the rabbi and here the rabbi comes calling the disciple. What was once a strange invitation now becomes a picture of a humble privilege.

It is not a sudden invitation but a process: I understand that when you read this in Matthew that it seems like Jesus just shows up out of leftfield and issues this invitation and these four young men, without much discernment, simply drop everything and follow Jesus. But this was not a sudden invitation that came out of nowhere. It was a process that took place over time.

Last week we saw from Matthew 4:12 that Jesus withdrew into Galilee and ultimately to Capernaum. We noted that this was now the second year of his earthly ministry. Matthew really doesn’t tell us anything about the first year of Jesus’ ministry on earth. We have to go to John 1-4 to get some information about the first year of Jesus’ ministry. It is in John 1 where Andrew and Peter and John first meet Jesus. Listen to

the first encounter these young men have with Jesus. It is found in John 1:35-42. *“The next day again John [the Baptist] was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, “What are you seeking?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and you will see.” So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter).”*

The passage begins with two disciples of John the Baptist approaching Jesus with this question, *“Rabbi, where are you staying?”* One of those disciples is later identified as Andrew and he goes and gets his brother Peter and introduces him to Jesus. The other disciple remains unnamed. Most people think it is John because John never refers to himself by name in his own Gospel. They met Jesus a whole year before Jesus comes calling them to follow him as their rabbi.

Did you hear the invitation Jesus made to them in John 1? He said to them *“Come and you will see.”* He invited these young men to just “hang out with him.” And so they witnessed the first miracle of Jesus, the turning of water to wine. They went down to Jerusalem with Jesus and probably wondered what they were getting themselves into when Jesus went into the Temple on Passover and started turning over the tables of the money changers. On their way back up to Galilee they stopped over in Samaria and witnessed the incredible conversation Jesus had with a Samaritan woman and how the whole town came out to see this Jesus. That is what happened in year one of Jesus’ ministry.

I imagine they came back to Galilee when Jesus withdrew to Galilee and went home to help the family business. We saw last week, Jesus went to his hometown of Nazareth when he returned to Galilee. It only make sense that these brothers returned home as well. But then Jesus was thrown out of the synagogue of his hometown for claiming to be the Messiah and speaking to the true spiritual condition of his people. And it is from here, he revisits these two sets of brothers who have already spent time with him and observed him. But this time, Jesus offers the invitation of a rabbi and invites these men to *“follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”* They were more than ready to go because to them this Jesus was more than a rabbi. He was the Messiah! This invitation to follow Jesus did not come all of a sudden. It was a process.

It is not just any rabbi, it is the Messiah: We already saw from the very beginning of their relationship, these young men believed Jesus to be the Messiah. Andrew said to his brother Peter in John 1:41, “*We have found the Messiah.*” John the Baptist had already pointed out Jesus to them by saying, “*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” When Jesus came announcing what we saw last week, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” he was claiming to be the Messiah. Tverberg says “to proclaim the kingdom of God was to make a shocking announcement that God’s promised Messiah had arrived, because the task of the Messiah was to establish God’s kingdom on earth. Jesus was making an earth-shattering claim that he was the Christ, and that God’s redemption of the world would come through him.”<sup>5</sup>

Being the Messiah, however, does not diminish the fact that Jesus was a rabbi. A contemporary Orthodox rabbi by the name of Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz said that the Scriptures predict that the messianic king would be a great teacher of the Torah. He writes, “The messianic king plays a unique role. He, as first citizen of the nation, is the living embodiment of Torah.” He said that this Messiah “submits to the laws in the Scriptures and does not rest until his people know the rigors of Torah study.”<sup>6</sup>

Next Sunday, we will begin looking at Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount. Listen to how it begins in Matthew 5:1. “*Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.*” This is a sermon for disciples of Jesus. It is through this sermon, Jesus begins to give his interpretation of Torah, how to live out the laws of God. You will hear Jesus say in this sermon, referring to the Torah, “*You have heard it said . . . But I say to you.*” He is interpreting the Torah for his disciples. He is explaining to them his way of life. And they are learning how to live as a disciple of Jesus by listening and observing. What did they say to Jesus when they saw him go off to pray? “*Lord, teach us to pray.*” We are your disciples. We want to do what you do!

As the Messiah, Jesus was the embodiment of God’s law. He was tempted, as we, are but was without sin. As the Savior he was able to die for our sins and pass onto us by faith his righteousness. His obedience became our obedience through faith. But it doesn’t end with “salvation.” As our rabbi, Jesus was also passing onto us a way of life. This Sermon on the Mount is a description of the life that the disciples were invited into and through observing and hearing Master Jesus, they learned a way of life.

It is not just an ancient practice but it is also our way of life: This brings me to our final observation. The call to make disciples is not just an ancient calling. The call to teach a way of life is not just an ancient calling. Don’t forget the invitation Jesus offered his disciples as their rabbi. It was a customary invitation. “*Follow me and I will make you*

*fishers of men.*” The goal of the rabbi was always to train the disciple so that the disciple can go and do likewise. The goal of the rabbi was to transfer his way of life through his disciples.

So we come to Matthew 28:19-20 and we find what we call “the Great Commission.” It is the “commissioning” of the disciples by their rabbi. Jesus says to them, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you. And behold I am with you always to the end of the age.*” In essence, Jesus is saying to them that they are ready to be “fishers of men.” They are ready to do the work of a rabbi and make disciples.

We are very familiar with this charge from Jesus to make disciples. We talk about it all the time. But I think there is something missing in our understanding of this charge because we have lost the “Jewish element” of this command. We have looked at this command without seeing the rabbinical model of discipleship. When we study the life of Christ, it is good to know who Jesus is - He is God in the flesh. He is Messiah. He is Savior. When we study the life of Christ, it is good to know what Jesus did. He lived in obedience to the Father. He died on the cross for our sins. He rose from the dead. He offers us eternal life and forgiveness. But he is also our rabbi who invites us to a way of life. And so when we study the life of Christ, it would be good for us to learn how Jesus made disciple. It would be good for us to observe how he invited people to follow him and he taught them by what he said and by inviting them to observe how he lived. Did you hear what I just said? Discipleship is not a class with a textbook. Discipleship is not just a study we do together. At the core of discipleship is the living of life, shoulder to shoulder. Discipleship is taught and caught. It requires relationship.

Parents this is part of the reason why I am asking you to prayerfully consider bringing your children into the worship service by the time they reach first grade. You will teach them more about worship and the place God has in your life simply through the weekly rhythm of coming and worshipping God with his people. They are observing you singing and praying and watching how you receive the message of God’s Word. Our actions speak louder than our words.

Herein lies our challenge. We are so “western” when it comes to discipleship. Our instruction tends to be institutional. Our relationships tend to be on the surface and minimal. And yet the example we see from our Master, Jesus, is that so much of passing on the way of life that Jesus offers us requires life on life. If you think you can’t disciple someone, just remember who Jesus called to be his disciples. They weren’t the smartest or the brightest. They just followed. This is not just an ancient practice, it is a

contemporary practice.

### **InFusion: An Invitation**

It is with this in mind, I would like to offer you an invitation. Perhaps it is a cross between the invitation Jesus offered the disciples in John 1 and Matthew 4. It is a cross between “Come and See” and “Come and Follow.” It is an invitation to have a deeper conversation about the principles we surfaced here in this message this morning. It is a conversation our leadership had this past year and we want to broaden the pool of those who participate in this conversation because we need to do a better job at passing on the way of life that Jesus offer us. To walk the way of life that Jesus offers us requires more training than a sermon can give, and I value sermons. It requires a ministry that brings one life up against another life. If the call of Jesus is to follow his way of life then we need to figure out how to pass that way of life onto others in the context of everyday life.

#### **Interview**

An invitation to participate in InFusion is in the pew rack in front of you and there is information on the inside cover of the bulletin. Here is how it will work. We will gather on a Sunday evening once a month from October to May (excluding December). From 5:00 to 6:00 we will share a meal together. This is not an optional part of our time together. We want to foster community and relationship. From 6:00 - 7:30 we will walk through the conversation together and at the end of our time together, I am praying that God would use you to speak into how we can better disciple one another in the context of relationships. This conversation is not just about church. It is about home. I hope that couples would be willing to come to this together. Make it a date night. It would be worth it! It is about every day life. It is open to senior high students through adults.

If you are willing to pray about it and if you are willing to receive more information, take the yellow card and fill it out and put it in the basket as you exit this morning. Signing the yellow card does not obligate you to be part of the conversation. Once we get your response, we will follow-up with a more detailed e-mail or letter explaining the commitment you will be making if you decide to be a part of InFusion. This will include a statement of covenant we will ask you to sign and return to us by Sunday, September 30. By signing the covenant, you are agreeing to accept the invitation and to make our times together a priority.

I am really excited about exploring this conversation together. If we have more than 50

people sign up, we will offer this on two different Sunday evenings. May God use this conversation to help us walk in the dust of our rabbi and may his way of life cover us so that others may see and know the love of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup>Lois Tverberg *Walking in the Feet of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012)

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009)