

## **The One Who Said No**

TEXT: Mark 10:17-31

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on March 3, 2024*

One of the most important choices that every one of us makes in life is our choice of associates. We don't choose our biological families, but as we grow to discover an ever-expanding world, we begin to choose the people we want around us—our friends, our life partners, our mentors, communities of religious, civic, or professional associates—all of whom, in a wide variety of ways, help shape our future and guide our present. The basic fact that those around us affect our thinking, behavior, and choices is the foundation of the biblical concept of discipleship.

When it comes to the associates of Jesus, we have two basic groups outside of his immediate family. One is his group of friends—the people he chose to visit, spend time with, and share with in mutual, caring relationship. The closest friends of Jesus that we're told of in the gospels is a trio of siblings who lived in Bethany, a small town outside of Jerusalem, part-way up the Mount of Olives. They were Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, and the Bible gives us stories about all three of them that are some of the best-remembered in all of Jesus' ministry.

While those three no doubt learned from Jesus' teachings, they were different from those who were formally disciples, which was an established, professional relationship in the culture with tightly defined roles. With Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, there's no indication that they ever took on the one defining role of a disciple—which was to leave everything for a period of days, weeks, months, or longer to serve, obey, and follow a rabbi around everywhere he went.

In the final hours of his life, Jesus tells his closest disciples in John 15 that he no longer calls them servants, but “friends.” Discipleship could lead to friendship in some cases, but that was not either the norm or the expectation in first-century, Jewish discipleship. Disciples and friends were different categories of relationship with different boundaries and expectations.

Jesus has a lot of disciples. At the start of Luke 10 he sends 72 of them out on a mission and there are signs of many more. Having disciples was not just common practice, but expected practice for a rabbi in Jesus' time. Jewish men were routinely encouraged to have at least one period of intense learning with a rabbi, a time that could last days, weeks, months or more. But there were rules around those decisions and interactions.

If a married man became a disciple for more than a month, he needed his wife's permission. We know Peter was married because Jesus heals his mother-in-law in Matthew 8 and also the first chapter of Mark. And if the wedding at Cana was John or another of Jesus' disciples, that's at least one more. But nothing said they couldn't spend time with family as the rabbi allowed.

Jesus never traveled very far from home. Especially while traveling around the Galilee, the northern region where most of the disciples were from, married disciples might have gotten home more frequently, even on longer tours of discipleship. When Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law in Matthew 8 there is an entire gathering at Peter's home and Jesus heals a bunch of them and drives out demons from others.

We often see Jesus with smaller groups of disciples—frequently the 12, but sometimes only Peter, James, and John. And when Jesus is with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, not even those three are with him. So, with the travel in a contained area and some breaks for festivals, Sabbaths or other occasions, family ties could have been more closely kept and Jesus had some time to nurture friends who were not strictly-speaking disciples.

Rabbis could not accept payment for teaching the Torah, and men frequently left or at least curtailed their professions for whatever time they were disciples. So others stepped up to cover living and traveling expenses for the rabbi and his most ardent followers. Some might have supportive professions, like the fishermen among the twelve.

In Jesus' case, we see that more direct funding came from a group of women. Three of them are named in Luke 8:1-3, Mary Magdalene, Joanna (the wife of one of King Herod's stewards), and Susanna. John tells us that Judas was the treasurer for the group, which likely hints at his usual profession.

Unless otherwise dictated by the rabbi, both the length and intensity of the discipleship could be decided by each individual, just as modern students might decide to get a degree part-time, full-time, or in some combination—sometimes while working other jobs, sometimes fully immersed in the work and living on grants or student loans.

But, in general, a disciple was a person making a commitment to literally follow, learn from, and imitate a rabbi, submitting to the rabbi's authority in everything for the length of the discipleship. One ancient Jewish bit of advice expresses the ideal by saying that if you encounter a rabbi, you should “cover yourself in the dust of his feet and drink in his words thirstily,” the image reflecting that you will literally follow him so closely that the dust he kicks up while walking will cover you.

While doing that, the disciples also served the rabbi. They did the cooking, carried supplies on the road, provided material support when possible, and whatever else was needed. Jesus often sent some of his disciples ahead of him to make logistical preparations for the group's arrival at their next destination, including making preparations for where they would celebrate the Passover as we see during Holy Week. Disciples also were expected to provide 24/7 physical protection to the rabbi; which is why you have Peter armed with a sword and cutting off a man's ear the night Jesus was arrested.

Given all that, you can see how totally reversed everything was when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and when Judas—one of the twelve closest disciples—betrays rather than protects him.

Disciples put themselves totally under the authority of the rabbi. They were encouraged—even mandated to ask questions about what a teaching meant or why a rabbi behaved in a certain way—but they had to learn whatever interpretation the rabbi offered and do what he told them. Criticism was off the table.

Disciples were not bound to continue as a disciple for any set period of time, even by the amount of time they thought they might spend when they set out. So, if a disciple discovered that they really couldn't stomach what they were being made to do or saw a better opportunity, they could quit and go home or go follow someone else. The Bible shows us disciples of John the Baptist turning on a dime to follow Jesus, when John points to Jesus as the greater teacher. What they couldn't do was continue as a disciple and disobey or openly criticize the rabbi.

Jewish men were encouraged to mix it up and become disciples of different rabbis across their lives to better help them sort out their own beliefs. But you were only a disciple of one at a time and, for that time, you were completely immersed in the teachings and behaviors taught by that particular rabbi. You learned to both talk the talk and walk the walk as that particular rabbi taught and lived it.

For the rabbi's part, in addition to teaching the Torah and its application to even the dullest of your disciples for as long as they consent to follow you, a sign of a rabbi's success was to have a disciple who becomes greater than himself. The most successful rabbi would be one who trained a disciple who came to outshine his master. Why? Because that meant the rabbi's teaching had been effective—not just effective in that the disciple learned it well, but that it was so effective when put into practice that it made positive changes in the world, and opened doorways to deeper thinking and more challenging practice.

One final thing to understand about the specific practice of discipleship is that both the disciples and rabbis had choices in the process. Random people could decide on their own to become disciples of Jesus, or any other rabbi, as long as they could consent to the rules of their particular teacher. Given the numbers, we can assume that most of Jesus' disciples came to him that way. They heard him teaching in a synagogue or on a hillside and decided to take on the role of disciple.

But what's more familiar to us are the stories of Jesus calling specific individuals to become his disciples. We have accounts of Jesus directly calling roughly half of those who became known as the twelve; and it's almost certain that Jesus knew many, if not all of them before the start of his ministry. Likely a number of them were actual family members. Jesus would not have specifically called people to become disciples if he didn't see in them the potential to become the rabbi's dream—someone who could one day be an even better rabbi and draw even more people closer to God.

The important question in all this for me is not what Jesus taught his disciples—we have four gospels full of exactly that. What isn't quite as straightforward are the qualities Jesus looked for in those that he specifically called. The stories of their calling are simple and we only get six. Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, and Matthew.

In John's gospel, Philip calls Nathanael—we're not sure if Nathanael was a brother or a friend of Philip, and Jesus says some great things about Nathanael—he's actually the only one where Jesus praises a personality trait, by saying, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" But there is no direct call of Nathanael from Jesus. He is also not mentioned in the lists of the twelve in any of the other three Gospels, so Nathanael is a bit of an enigma.

If Jesus directly called any of the remaining twelve, we don't have those accounts. They may have essentially self-selected by following Jesus with more zeal or for a longer period of time. We know some of the six who got direct calls were previously disciples of John the Baptist, so those at least had been willing to endure a far more ascetic lifestyle than Jesus required of his own disciples. But we don't know all that much about why Jesus wanted those six in particular.

And that's where I think we can learn from the also-rans—those others who wanted to become disciples of Jesus, and came to him. Matthew 8 gives us two of them in verses 19-22: "A scribe then approached and said, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' Another of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.'"

Matthew doesn't tell us whether those men accepted the conditions or not; but it makes clear that when people came and asked to be formally considered among Jesus' disciples, he laid out at least some of the conditions that would be expected. This was not a leisure activity, or a comfortable retreat where attendees would sit back on pillows and learn new and exciting things before retiring to comfortable quarters for the night. There was no, "I'm really sorry I can't come today, but I had a family emergency." Becoming a disciple of Jesus meant making that time of learning with him the very top priority in life.

I know of only one complete picture of someone coming to Jesus to learn, Jesus seeing in the man the qualities that would make him great, issuing the call in the same formula as was given to Peter and the others, and the person turning away. And that is this morning's story from Mark 10, a story that is included also in Matthew and Luke.

Like with some other enquiries, it comes when Jesus is heading out on a journey. That's where you might expect a question or an offer of discipleship, because Jesus is leaving town and disciples were the ones who followed from place to place. If you hear enough that you like while Jesus is in town, it's when he packs up to leave that you might consider the next level of commitment—becoming a disciple and following him at least on the next leg of the journey.

We're told the man runs to Jesus and kneels; it's a respectful petition and shows his deep desire to know the answer to his question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?". Jesus tells him to follow the commandments, listing specifically the commandments dealing with the treatment of others. The man tells Jesus that he has kept all of those commandments from his youth.

And then we get the remarkable line, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." That detail speaks volumes, and it also helps us to imagine the tone in what Jesus says to him next, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, and follow me."

Jesus didn't say those words with a sneer at the man's wealth. He didn't say them with the assumption that the man would never do it, which is how the responses to the men in Matthew 8 sound to me. I might be wrong, but as far as I can tell, this is the only place where Jesus gets as far as issuing the formulaic call of "Come, and follow me" and the person does not accept.

Clearly the man was not expecting the rule to sell his assets, which could indicate that Jesus didn't mandate that for everyone. Mark tells us the man was shocked and went away grieving. And I imagine that Jesus was grieving, too, since we got the detail of how taken Jesus was with the man's faith, sincerity, and commitment. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Out of all the people we meet in the Gospels, this is the guy whose full story I really want to know.

This passage is typically pulled out to preach about the way money can block us from the kingdom of God. And that's not wrong. This encounter was not private—at least Peter and some other disciples watched and heard what unfolded; and Jesus' specific lament when he returns to them is exactly that—"How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" he says.

Then they go on to talk about how much each of his disciples has given up, with Jesus' assuring them that they will be rewarded. But, unlike in Jesus' parables, the rich man here was a real man. We don't know his name, but he surely had one. He had a family, a history, a faith, and a future.

And something in his approach, the sincerity of his question and effort, made Jesus see something special in him. Jesus' heart went out to him and hoped that this man in particular might become a disciple—one that Jesus could fully train; one that he believed would bear fruit; one that might even stay awake and keep watch with him on a night when he sweat blood in prayer. Whatever Jesus had seen in Peter and Andrew, in James and John, in Philip and perhaps in Nathanael, was also here in this young man. But Jesus' offer was rejected.

What happened to the young man after this? The money part is secondary to me in this story. What did this choice mean for that man in his life to come? As a faithful Jew who has kept all the commandments from his youth, he must have been in Jerusalem for the Passover. Did he see Jesus enter Jerusalem on a donkey in the palm-waving procession? That happens in the very next chapter. The journey that Jesus is setting out to make when the rich young man approaches him is his final journey to Jerusalem. Did the rich man join that throng descending the Mount of Olives?

Was he in the crowd who told Pilate to release Barabbas instead of Jesus? Was he in the crowd listening to Peter on Pentecost? Or did his grief later turn to anger that the bar was set too high; did he turn away from Jesus figuratively and not just literally and go become a disciple of one of the many other rabbis in the region? Did he, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection shake his head at Jesus untimely death and sigh, "But I had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel."

Of all the stories in the Bible—all the parables and proverbs, the visions and prophecies, the exploits of saints and sinners—it's the story of this one unnamed rich man that haunts me. It's here, on my knees with this man, where I have to face myself and recognize that entering the kingdom of God is ultimately my own choice—the choice to keep the first of the ten commandments to have no other gods. To make the choice to hold nothing back—to love the Lord my God with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my strength, and with all my mind—all, all, all—including all of whatever family, home, or possessions I may have. With all my life. With every breath.

Is there something I still hold back? Is there something Jesus could ask of me that would make me get up off my knees and turn away grieving? In many ways I think it's the only question a church should be asking. And the answers are as different as we are. For this man the stumbling block was wealth. For the lawyer who asked Jesus the exact same question in Luke 10 it was loving his enemies. What is it for us, for you?

Discipleship is 100% choice. It is not coercive, but it's also not a bargaining opportunity. As much as Jesus loved this young man, he didn't go running after him saying, "Okay, half. Sell half and then come and follow me." Neither did Jesus drag him by the hair over to the rest of the disciples, take his purse and his cloak, and send Matthew to go take his flocks and herds because Jesus knew best what the man really needed to do.

Jesus just states the conditions, makes the offer, and then lets the chips fall where they may; because the only true disciples have given up whatever they have given up of their own free will. They have made the choice to follow and put themselves under the authority of Jesus, and then they continue to make—or unmake—that choice every step of the journey.

The point is not the money—that was this man's sticking point, but it may not be yours or mine. The point is the choice required of Jesus' disciples is to put God first, to love God with all, to decide to follow Jesus so closely that we are covered in the dust of his feet. Amen.