

NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLES OF SPIRITUAL FITNESS

I Corinthians 11:1

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you.

Reportedly there is a sign at the start of a dirt road in Alaska that reads: “choose your rut carefully, you will be in it for the next 50 miles.” I imagine that is good advice. But I know it is good advice on the road of life. Choose carefully because you are going to have to live with your choices. Sometimes you have to live with your choices for a very long time. And there is one choice you will have to live with for eternity.

In I Corinthians 11:1, the apostle Paul challenged the Christians to follow his example just as he followed the example of Jesus Christ. That is a challenge we must consider, too. Will we choose to follow those who followed Jesus? The pages of the New Testament are full of the story of those who have followed the example of those who personally walked with Jesus.

My goal is that today, we, too, will attempt to learn from those who walked with Jesus. Among other things we can learn that the choice of our leader will determine our destination.

In Mark 3:13-14, the author of that shortest of all gospels writes, “¹³ Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. ¹⁴ He appointed twelve—designating them apostles – that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach.” I want to focus on the first reason that Jesus gave for why he called twelve men to be both his disciples (his learners) and his apostles (his messengers). Jesus said he called these twelve “that they might be with him.” Jesus intended for the twelve to physically spend time in his presence watching, listening, learning, asking questions and apprenticing themselves to him so that they would be trained and equipped to then disciple others. That was the Master’s plan of evangelism: the sought are taught until they, too, become seekers and teachers.

The story of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) is the story of Jesus and his teaching, training, guiding and coaching a dozen men to carry on his ministry after him. Then the story of the next book of the New Testament, the book of Acts, is the record of how those men picked up the ministry of Jesus and carried it further.

In the earliest chapters of the book of Acts, the main character seems to be Simon Peter. The other apostles get a mention now and then but the one who gets the most ink seems to be the apostle Peter.

In Acts chapter 2, Simon Peter preached what is considered the first gospel sermon as he declared the good news about the death, burial and resurrection of

Jesus. His sermon was not illustrated with PowerPoint and a video projector. Better than that, he had an audio-video outpouring of the Holy Spirit to punctuate his sermon and drive the message home. Those who listened to him first heard the sound of a rushing mighty wind. Then Simon Peter and the other apostles were visited with heavenly flames as tongues of fire separated and hovered over each of them.

Between the powerful demonstrations of the Holy Spirit and the powerful preaching of the apostles, the people who heard were convinced about the truth of their message and were convicted about the truth of their sin. In response, about 3,000 people responded to the invitation to repent and be baptized and the Lord added them to the church that day.

Within a few days and a couple of chapters in Acts, Simon Peter and the apostle John were arrested and hauled before the Jewish leaders, The Council or the Sanhedrin. The leaders of the Jews were disturbed because Peter and John were preaching that there is a resurrection of the dead and their proof was that they had seen Jesus die, had watched while he was buried and then saw him alive again three days later.

Because of this, the members of the Council of Jewish leaders had Peter and John arrested and kept in jail overnight. But Acts 4:4 reads, *“But many people who heard their message believed it so that the number of believers totaled about five-thousand men, not counting women and children.”*

The next day, the Council of all the rulers and elders and teachers of the religious law met in Jerusalem. They brought in Peter and John and asked them by what power and in whose name they were doing and saying the things they were doing and saying. Peter and John spoke boldly to these powerful people. Verse 13 of Acts chapter 4 says:

¹³ When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

They could tell that these men had been with Jesus. It is hard to argue with the one who has been there. It is hard to refute the witness who has heard with his own ears, seen with his own eyes, touched with his own hands and knows precisely what he is talking about.

¹³ When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

Among those early believers who heard the gospel from the apostles was a man by the name of Stephen. Stephen had learned about Jesus from those who had been with him. And Stephen became a disciple of Jesus, too. Acts 6:8 records

that Stephen was *“a man full of God’s grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.”*

Stephen’s gracious spirit, powerful teaching and miraculous signs caught the attention of people in high places and they felt the need to silence him. So they stoned him to death...and with that, Stephen became the first Christian to be martyred for Jesus.

One of the Jewish leaders who watched, consented and, in his own way, assisted in the martyrdom of Stephen, was a man named Saul. Saul was from the city of Tarsus and was also a member of the Sanhedrin.

Saul was determined to stamp out Christianity and toward that end he persecuted Christians to try to get them to renounce their faith in Jesus. And he even had Christians put to death to silence their testimony.

But while he could silence individuals, he could not silence the gospel. The truth spread and hundreds more believed...thousands, in fact.

Then, in Acts chapter 9, we have a record of an encounter that this same Saul had with Jesus, himself. Jesus appeared to Saul, spoke to him, confronted him about his actions and called him to be a disciple, too. Eventually, Saul became a follower of Jesus.

Saul went back home to Tarsus and got active in the church there. I’m sure he did some preaching and teaching but I also have no doubt he did some listening and learning.

In the city of Antioch, there was a man named Barnabas who, we are told, was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. Barnabas was leading lots of people to Jesus and he needed help to teach them so he sent to Tarsus and asked Saul to help. Saul worked with Barnabas in Antioch for over a year and did, no doubt learn a lot from him about Jesus.

Barnabas disciplined Saul for over a year. In due course, the story of the book of Acts takes a significant turn and it is largely the story of Saul (who was also known as Paul) and his ministry as a messenger of the gospel.

Now I go into all of this detail to try to demonstrate that the history of the church is the history of people following the teachings of people who had been with Jesus.

Can I speak bluntly with you? Everybody is following somebody.

In 2005, Rob Bell, founding pastor with Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan published a book titled *Velvet Elvis*. In that book, Bell writes:

Everybody follows somebody. All of us make decisions every day about what is important, how to treat people, and what to do with our lives. These decisions come from what we believe about every aspect of our existence. And we got our beliefs from somewhere. We have been formed, every one of us, by this complicated mix of people and places and things. Parents and teachers and artists and scientists and mentors – we are each taking all of these influences and living our lives according to which teachings we have made our own. Some insist that they aren't influenced by any person or any religion, that they think for themselves. And that's an honorable perspective. The problem is they got that perspective from...somebody. They're following somebody even if they insist it is themselves they are following. Everybody is following somebody. Everybody has faith in something and somebody. We are all believers.

I don't agree with everything Rob Bell says in Velvet Elvis but I think he is right on in saying that we are all following somebody. Somebody taught us, mentored us, influenced us. To use a very Biblical term, somebody disciplined us. For most of us, there have been several people who have helped to steer our steps on the path we have walked. And they still do.

Since it is true that we all follow someone, the choice is whom. In Matthew 7:15, Jesus said, *"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."* Beware who your teachers are. Be careful who your leaders are.

Do not choose whom you will follow just based on slick talk, charming personality and the promise of an easy life. There are always smooth talkers that will try to seduce you into seeing things their way and living life their way. They get some sense of validation out of your agreement with them.

The apostle Paul spoke to this in I Corinthians 2:1-5 where he said:

¹When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

It's not that Paul couldn't have been a silver-tongued orator. In fact there were times he was quite articulate and very eloquent. But in Corinth, at least, he wanted to make use that the people were drawn to the message of the gospel and not just to his passion, his presentation or his personality. Over the years, there have been many who were persuasive but who proved to be blind guides and false teachers.

The first lesson I want us to learn is that we must choose wisely whom we will follow because that will determine where you will be when you finish your journey. In Luke 21:8, Jesus plainly taught that many would come making the false claim that they were doing so in his name and by his authority. Jesus said bluntly, "Do not follow them." Why not? They would not be following Jesus so they would lead you astray. Choose wisely whom you will follow because that will determine where you will be when your journey is over.

It is not only true that our choice of leader will determine our destination, it is also true that our choice of destination will determine our leader. Where do you want to spend eternity? Once you have answered that question, the choice of a leader becomes apparent.

- Hinduism offers you the chance to live, die and come back as another life form, most likely an animal.
- Islam offers a paradise of eternal sensual pleasure and carnal indulgence.
- Buddhism offers Nirvana, which is to cease to exist.
- Christianity offers eternal life in the presence of God.

Now you may think that the reward offered by one of these other religions is pretty appealing. But may I point out to you that the founders, the prophets and the holy men of these religions are only speculating on what their eternity is going to be like. In contrast, Jesus is the only one who died, was buried, who returned to heaven and then came back to walk on this earth for a time. And then when he ascended, he said, *"I go to prepare a place for you and if I go to prepare a place for you I will come again and receive you unto myself so that where I am there you may be also."*

You see, with all of these other religious leaders, you are asked to trust that they have guessed correctly about what happens after death. Only Jesus can lead us from here to glory because only he has been there, has come back, returned again and has promised to come back to bring us home with him.

If we want to go to heaven when we die, we have to follow the one who knows the way because he's been there before. Jesus is the one who has been there and who wants to lead us to his home. We cannot physically walk with him. But we can read the record of those who did walk with him. And we can follow those who followed Jesus.

Where do you suppose we will learn how they walked so we can follow them? There is only one reliable source from which to learn: the Bible.

My dear friends, remember you will be dead a lot longer than you have been alive. Please give careful consideration to where you want to spend eternity. And when you have decided where you want to go, you can make a wise choice about whom to follow to get there.

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So will you? Will you follow those who followed Jesus so you can put your feet in his footsteps? The footsteps of Jesus will lead you to the cross but they will also lead you to a crown when this life is over. Will you come follow him?

INVITATION: #685 – *“Footsteps of Jesus”*