

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Follow the Leader

Jesus, Lead Worshipper

(Mark 1:35)

Study #1

Introduction: I'm playing as well as I can...

Last Sunday afternoon, along with a couple dozen other guys, I played Ultimate Frisbee on the field of battle that is Stevenson Middle School.

When these games happen, it is a foregone conclusion that I'm gonna be placed on the "old guys" team. Well, last Sunday the old guys did OK. I believe the "young guys" won by two games to one, but then they cheated. They used speed, agility, coordination, endurance, skill and athleticism!

But it was fun - and for about an hour and a half, a good time was had by all.

How did I do?

Well, I played as hard as I could. I really tried. During the course of the games I caught a pass or two and threw a completion or two. But then I also missed several and threw a few away.

But, like I said, during the game I tried really, really hard. There were problems with my play. But the problem with my play was not due to a lack of effort during the games.

You may have heard the old saying - "*Great in practice; Great in games*"? That saying applied perfectly to my performance on the Ultimate field last weekend.

My lackluster performance was due in large measure to the fact that I hadn't been practicing my throws and catches.

I didn't do well, not because of a lack of trying and not because of a lack of effort during the game, but because of a lack of **preparation** for the game.

As former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden put it, "*Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.*"

Wooden was undoubtedly right when it comes to basketball (and, evidently, Ultimate Frisbee). But I have wondered recently if a lack of preparation might be just as vital to a life that honors God.

A few weeks ago I mentioned research from the Barna Research Group that indicates that in a number of specific areas, the behavior of Christians is very little different than the behavior of those who claim no relationship with Christ at all.¹

Why is that?

Why is it that we who know Jesus and want to honor God in all we do so often don't do very well at resisting temptation to sin, don't serve with a gracious attitude, don't maintain a calm spirit when the pressure is on, and aren't loving in the face of adversity?

I'll bet that most everybody here is interested in leading a God-honoring life. Yet for many of us progress is painfully slow, moral failures occur routinely, breakthroughs are infrequent, and the general direction of our lives often seems "stuck."

¹ Barna's research touched on such items as a propensity to gamble, visit a pornographic website, take something that did not belong to them, consult a medium or psychic, physically fight or abuse someone, consume enough alcohol to be considered legally drunk, use an illegal drug, lie, seek revenge on someone for a wrong suffered, and gossip.

Is part of the problem, perhaps, that many of us have adopted the Dave Smith Ultimate Frisbee philosophy for the spiritual life? Is it possible that we are relying on effort when the pressure is on without the needed preparation when there is no pressure?

I wonder...

Would change happen more dramatically and more regularly if there was a “practice,” a “training regimen” we could engage in when the pressure is off that would strengthen us for the times when the pressure is on?

And, just to be clear, I’m talking about change of a substantial nature. Not just change of a habit, or a window-dressing kind of change.

I’m thinking of a deep change of character and motivation. Not just rearranging the external furniture of our lives but overhauling life’s direction to the point where honoring God is the thing we’re most passionate about?

If such a “practice” exists, what would it look like? Where would we discover it? Has anybody trekked into this wilderness before? Are there maps available?

Well, it so happens that a deep, passionate longing for substantial change is something that has resonated in the hearts of God’s people, world-wide and through the ages.

And some very wise men and women have written on the subject, some of them in times past and some more recently.² While they offer advice that differs in some particulars, they are united in one point.

**CHRISTIANS WHO WANT TO HONOR GOD
IN THE HEAT OF BATTLE
SHOULD LOOK DEEPLY AT JESUS AND IMITATE HIS LIFE.**

² Among the more recent authors are Dallas Willard and Richard Foster. Others who have written very helpfully on the subject of personal change are Alan Nelson, Gordon MacDonald, and Larry Crabb.

Now, if it seems that you have just been led into one of the biggest “duh” moments ever, wait!

Imitate Jesus. Of course we should imitate Jesus!!

But, have you ever given serious thought to the idea that imitating Jesus’ *lifestyle* - doing the things that He did while He lived on this earth as a human being - is what it means to “*follow Him*”?

Look deeply at Jesus and imitate His life. It’s a good thing to look deeply at Jesus’ life. His life is, without question, worth looking at. He is a fascinating study on so many levels.

And if we are going to look at Jesus -

- we could look at His miracles with a view to fostering **worship**.
- we could look at His promises with a view to fostering **confidence**.
- we could look at His saving death and resurrection with a view to fostering **gratefulness** for all He did for us at the end of His life.
- we could look at His relationships with people with a view to **learning how to rightly deal with others**.

All of that would be valuable. But over the next six, short weeks, I want to look broadly at the manner of Jesus’ life to learn how He was able to live in such a way that He consistently honored God.³

Never losing sight of the fact that He was the Son of God, we’ll be looking at Jesus as the perfect Man, who models how we are to live and who calls us to “*follow Him*.”

Over the next few weeks we’ll consider His LIFE and seek to “*walk in His steps*” (1 Peter 2:21) when it comes to His commitment to **worship, community, solitude, simplicity, generosity and service**. Today - **WORSHIP!**

³ And Jesus did “learn” to live. Consider these verses: [*Hebrews 5:8*] *Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.* [*Luke 2:52*] - *And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.*

He's our leader and we're going to aim to learn how to "Follow the Leader."

I want to start out by making an observation about a particular aspect of Jesus' life - and then we'll trace that aspect back to its source.

Specifically, Jesus was, start to finish, all about God. There was about Him a lack of self-consciousness, nothing calculated or contrived about the way He conducted Himself. He lived and acted out of a sincere motivation to honor God in everything He did - seemingly regardless of the consequences to Himself.

Two events in His life serve as bookends, bracketing the beginning and the end of His public ministry, that show that He was all about God.

We turn to John, chapter 2, first, to watch Him cleaning out God's Temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus - All About God!

At the Place of Worship

Early Temple cleansing (John 2:13-22)

Early in the ministry of Jesus, He was in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration and entered the Temple. What He found there infuriated Him. And to deal with what He found in the Temple He made quite a scene!

He saw people buying and selling and changing money. He saw graft and fraud everywhere. Without asking for permission, He took action against this gross misbehavior.

He made a whip out of some cords and, using the whip, drove the money changers out of the Temple. He poured out all their money and overturned their tables.

To those who were selling doves, He shouted out, *[16]... "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business."*

He was overwhelmed by a desire to see His Father honored. Seeing Him dishonored devastated Him AND energized Him to change things!

Jesus was consumed by zeal for God from the very beginning. That's what John tells us.

Now fast forward to the end of His life. We see the same thing happening all over again.⁴

Later Temple cleansing (Mark 11:15ff)

Three years later - to the very week - He was back in Jerusalem for Passover. The buyers and the sellers were back at it, perhaps not expecting this Galilean carpenter to disrupt their business again.

But Jesus, knowing full well the costs associated with His act, did the same thing He had done three years earlier -

[Mark 11:15]...He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; [16] and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple.⁵

More than any other action Jesus took, it was this act that prompted the religious rulers to seek to have Jesus killed. But Jesus seemed not to care. No sense of self-preservation or self-protection about Him. He was all about God.

And there are other indicators that show how truly God-focused Jesus was. Through the ages, people who have been all about God have frequently practiced fasting. Count Jesus among those.

In Fasting (Matthew 4:1-11)

[Matthew 4:1] Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. [2] And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.⁶

⁴ This act is recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke

⁵ See Matthew 21:12-13; Luke 19:45-48

⁶ See also Luke 4:1-13

Prior to the launch of His public ministry, He was led by the Spirit of God deep into the Judean wilderness. There were temptations He had to face and He would go face-to-face with the tempter.

The Bible tells us that it was the Spirit of God who led Jesus into the wilderness. But it was Jesus who determined that He would fast.

Notice the sheer physicality of the fact that He fasted forty days and forty nights. That's well past the point of a few hunger pangs, way past the point of knowing a bit of weakness for a missed meal, long past the point of living on the body's fat. Jesus denied Himself food to the point of true, genuine hunger.

And why did He fast? He fasted because He had the sense that He needed strength from God to face the temptations the devil was going to throw His way. And He was more than willing to forego meals for a month and a half to be ready for the challenge. He did not fail to prepare. For Jesus, fasting was all about being all about God.

And Jesus prayed. The Son of God prayed to God the Father, frequently, fervently, and at the drop of a hat!

In Prayer

PRAISING - out of the blue! (Matthew 11:25-26)

Once, after a bitter confrontation with the religious leaders of His day and just before He made a gracious invitation to people to come to Him to find rest for their souls, Jesus prayed.

[Matthew 11:25]... "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. [26] Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight.

He simply burst into prayer with no prompting by a pressing situation or by a request from anybody else. It was just a spontaneous [spiritual] combustion due to a heart on fire for God!

It's hard to grasp exactly why He prayed at that point. He simply wanted to give thanks to His Father for revealing mysteries to the lowly.

Then, after the death of His good friend, Lazarus, Jesus went to the city where Lazarus had lived - Bethany.

REQUESTING the miraculous (John 11:41-42)

He arrived several days after Lazarus had died. And standing outside of Lazarus' tomb, with a crowd of onlookers curious as to what He was about to do, He prayed.

[41]... "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. [42] "I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me."

He made a public appeal to the Father for a miracle so as to build faith in the people who were watching and listening.

He prayed throughout His whole life, and we could multiply examples of His prayer life. But the last hours of Jesus' life were especially filled with prayer.

INTERCEDING for US (John 17)

All of John 17 is a record of the prayer He prayed for His disciples, both then and now, ancient and modern.

He asked the Father to give us **joy** and **unity**, to **protect** us from the attacks of the evil one, to **set us apart** for holy purposes and to make our unity an **evangelistic force**.

PLEADING for God's will (Luke 22:39-46)

He prayed later that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. Knowing what He would face in a few hours, Jesus separated Himself from His followers, asked them to pray for Him, and then went off by Himself to pray, alone.

Jesus was so horrified by the reality of the suffering He was about to endure - the physical, but even more the spiritual separation from His Father - that He poured out His soul to God.

And talk about fervent prayer! The Bible tells us that *[44]...being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.*⁷

Then, three of the seven sayings of Jesus from the cross were prayers. First, he prayed forgiveness for those who had crucified Him.

From the cross

Forgiveness (Luke 23:34)

[Luke 23:34] But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.

Then, He cried out to God in desperation, having lost the intimacy He had enjoyed with His Father for ETERNITY!

Desperation (Matthew 27:45ff)

[Matthew 27:45] Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. [46] About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”⁸

And at the end, after hours of unimaginable horror and agony, Jesus prayed as He died, committing His own spirit to God.

Consecration (Luke 23:46)

[Luke 23:46] And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.” Having said this, He breathed His last.

Now, in addition to being all about worship and all about God, Himself, Jesus was concerned that His followers be all about God, too.

Jesus’ Disciples - to be All About God!

The Disciples’ Prayer

He taught His disciples how to pray by giving a model to learn from. What we call “The Lord’s Prayer” would be better called, “The Disciples’ Prayer.” Prayer, Jesus tells us, involves worship and praise, petition, confession.

[Matthew 6:9] “Pray, then, in this way:

‘Our Father who is in heaven,

Hallowed be Your name.

[10] ‘Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

[11] ‘Give us this day our daily bread.

[12] ‘And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

[13] ‘And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]’⁹

Jesus says that when it comes to prayer, sincerity is the thing. We don’t pray for the applause of people. After all, when we pray we aren’t speaking to the ceiling or to ourselves or to the people around us. We are talking to Almighty God!

When You Pray, PRAY!

Be GENUINE (Matthew 6:6-8)

[Matthew 6:6] But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. [7] And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. [8] So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

Be genuine. No need to be verbose. Yet at the same time, your Father wants you to be persistent in your prayers.

⁷ See also Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42

⁸ See also Mark 15:33-34

⁹ See also Luke 11:1-4

Prayer is not a magical formula which, if we get right, will guarantee a “yes” answer! But if your prayer is not answered immediately, you are welcomed to pray again and again and again and again.

Never give up in prayer. God is listening - and He is GOOD!

He told a story to illustrate that point.

Be CONVINCED OF GOD’S GOODNESS (Luke 11:5-8)

[Luke 11:5] Then He said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; [6] for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; [7] and from inside he answers and says, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ [8] “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

Found in Luke 11, it is the story of a man who had a neighbor in need who REALLY didn’t want to help this neighbor in the middle of the night. But the neighbor shamelessly begged and begged and begged until the sleepy friend finally got out of bed and gave him what he needed.

Jesus’ point is that if a stingy neighbor can finally be persuaded to meet a pressing need, then HOW MUCH MORE will God come to the aid of His children when they cry out to Him!

Then, too, you and I are to go to God in prayer convinced of His justice. Jesus drove home this point by means of a story about a judge and a widow.

Be CONVINCED OF GOD’S JUSTICE (Luke 18:1-8)

[Luke 18:1] Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, [2] saying, “In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. [3] “There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’

[4] “For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, [5] yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’ “

In this story a selfish, unrighteous, callous judge finally gives in to the legitimate pleas for help of a poor, defenseless widow. And the point is that if even a judge like that can be convinced to help, HOW MUCH MORE will God help His children who cry out to Him!

The Gospels record some of Jesus’ public prayers and detail some of His teaching about the importance of prayer. But they also give glimpses into His personal private prayer life as well. And this is rich, indeed.

Jesus - Modeling a Life All About God

The Choice of the Twelve (Luke 6:12-16)

The Lord’s plan was that He would build into the lives of a dozen men who would then carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth after He died.

The choice of these men was obviously of extreme importance. So, what did Jesus do prior to selecting the twelve men who would carry on after He was gone?

[Luke 6:12] It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God.

The proper preparation for such a weighty choice would be through prayer.

And then there are quite a few times when we are told that Jesus simply slipped away to be by Himself with God in prayer.

Slips Away for Times of Prayer

Right after the feeding of the 5,000 (Mark 6:45)

After the feeding of the 5,000,¹⁰ Jesus knew His need for prayer. As soon as the miracle was over and the crowd had dispersed, **[Mark 6:45]...Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida, while He Himself was sending the crowd away. [46] After bidding them farewell, He left for the mountain to pray.**¹¹

Not long afterwards, He decided to spend some time praying again. This time, though, He opted to take along three of His disciples to pray with Him.

For a time of prayer with three select apostles (Luke 9:28)

[Luke 9:28] Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

On this trip, Jesus was transfigured before them and appearing with Him were Moses and Elijah! That was a prayer meeting that Peter, James and John never forgot!¹²

There is no mistaking that worship was Jesus' passion - and His disciples noticed. There was something compelling about the way He prayed and spoke with God that prompted His disciples to want what He had!

The disciples noticed! (Luke 11:1)

[Luke 11:1] It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples."

And then there were the times when He would just slip off, unnoticed, to pray

Slipping away to pray (Luke 5:15)

[Luke 5:15] But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses. [16] BUT JESUS HIMSELF WOULD OFTEN SLIP AWAY TO THE WILDERNESS AND PRAY. (emphasis added)

Clearly, Jesus was all about God. He was all about prayer. But to see the radical extent to which Jesus centered Himself in God, the presence of God, a relationship with God, worship of God, I recommend that we look at one episode recorded in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel.

The episode I'm thinking of occurred at the end of one week and the beginning of another. To the Jewish way of thinking, the week ended on the Sabbath, which is Friday evening through Saturday evening. We catch up with Jesus at the beginning of the Sabbath morning in the village of Capernaum.

Keeps a "date" with God

A very special Sabbath

Teaching in the synagogue

[1:21] They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach. [22] They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Jesus and His disciples (at this point there were only four) traveled to Capernaum, a small town on the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee. When the Sabbath day rolled around, they entered the synagogue. Jesus stepped forward to teach.

This was a perfectly appropriate thing for Him to do. He was of age (about thirty years old) and had freedom to speak in the synagogue.

¹⁰ Actually many more people than this, as the 5,000 number doesn't include women and children.

¹¹ See also Matthew 14:23.

¹² See 2 Peter 12:16-18.

But the group that had gathered for worship that day noted that His teaching was markedly different from the fare they were used to hearing from the scribes. Jesus' teaching came with authority! Like He knew what He was talking about. Like He meant what He was saying.

Now teaching and preaching are activities that are both energizing and draining. I thoroughly LOVE to bring God's Word on Sunday mornings and on other occasions.

But I'll be honest. After a morning of speaking here at church, I'm often quite drained. (Although I frequently have the energy for Ultimate Frisbee... I'm brain drained.)

When someone gives Himself to speak God's Word to God's people, it is to engage in exercise, it is to give. I suspect that after speaking in the synagogue, Jesus was both drained and energized, as are most who engage in the ministry of the Word.

At the conclusion of the service, though, there was no time for rest. In fact, there was a great disruption at the back of the synagogue.

Exorcism

[1:23] Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, [24] saying, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!" [25] And Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" [26] Throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice and came out of him.

Imagine the scene here were that to happen on a Sunday morning at the conclusion of a worship service here at Northwest. Loud voices. Someone screaming with a voice that is not their own. A violent struggle with convulsions.

I've spoken recently with someone who has had some experience with spiritual warfare and even with encounters with demonic powers. He tells me that such encounters as Jesus had are not pleasant. They are exhausting and can be dangerous.

Of course, Jesus handled the matter with a word in the Capernaum synagogue. But it's one more piece of an already busy day.

And things are going to get busier. News of Jesus' teaching AND triumph over a demon travels fast!

Jesus is "the news"

[1:27] They were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." [28] Immediately the news about Him spread everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee.

The good people of Capernaum were awestruck by this demonstration of raw power! And *immediately* Jesus' reputation as a miracle-worker began to spread. The day has been full to overflowing, but there's more to come.

Jesus' next miracle was personal.

Healing Simon's mother-in-law

[1:29] And immediately after they came out of the synagogue, they came into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. [30] Now Simon's mother-in-law was lying sick with a fever; and immediately they spoke to Jesus about her. [31] And He came to her and raised her up, taking her by the hand, and the fever left her, and she waited on them.

What seems significant about this miracle is that with such little exposure to Jesus, the family spoke to Him about Simon's mother-in-law, assuming not only that He was **able** to do something to affect the situation, but that He would be **willing** to do something about it.

And He did! Jesus healed her and she was immediately restored to full health.

And as full as the day has been to this point, THAT is nowhere near the end of this day.

A night of POWER!!

[1:32] When evening came, after the sun had set, they began bringing to Him all who were ill and those who were demon-possessed. [33] And the whole city had gathered at the door. [34] And He healed many who were ill with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and He was not permitting the demons to speak, because they knew who He was.

What is recorded in three verses and can be read in less than a minute surely represents hours and hours of activity. The healing and exorcism service in Simon Peter's home didn't start until after the sun had set. Jesus would certainly have spent time with each hurting person, dealing with them individually.

And even though Capernaum was a small town, the Bible says that ***“all who were ill”*** and ***“those who were demon-possessed”*** came to the house.

Wow! That was one whale of a day! Jesus began this Sabbath with a corporate worship service which He led, one that turned into a wild exorcism.

He became an instant paparazzi-worthy celebrity and experienced the first crush of a frantic crowd, while healing Peter's mother-in-law and then perhaps dozens of people long into the night.

And now watch Jesus after an over-long day and a too-short night.

A remarkable Monday morning (1:35)

[35] In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there.

Amazing! Despite the fullness of His life, Jesus invested in a time of prayer early the next morning, knowing that the secret to honoring God in the public pressure-cooker is nurturing a relationship with God in private.

Conclusion:

Have you ever heard, *“The systems you have in place are perfectly designed to give you the results you are getting.”*

It is a “saying” often used to get the attention of a person in business who wants to increase productivity.

But I think that it is also true when it comes to following Jesus.

The spiritual habits we have put in place are perfectly designed to give us the results we are getting when it comes to resisting temptation to sin, increasing our capacity for love, becoming a bolder witness, or growing in service.

If we would “follow” Jesus, we will imitate Him. “Following” doesn't just mean that we will try our hardest when the pressure's on. It involves preparing ourselves for the time of pressure by nurturing a relationship with God - as Jesus did.

Jesus was all about God. He wants you and me to be all about God, too. And being all about God when the going gets tough starts when we become people who regularly, daily, pray.