

Free To Follow: Rediscovering Jesus Beyond Religion  
Part 1: Why Jesus Isn't About Religion—And Never Was  
Luke 5:1-11

**Summary:**

Jesus offers belonging over behavior, invitation over conformity. Following him has nothing to do with religion and everything to do with real love.

**Main Ideas:**

Most people have felt like they don't belong at church.

One of the most common issues people have with religion is its push for conformity.

Jesus didn't bring a new religion. He created something better.

Jesus always starts in our real story.

Faith doesn't begin with certainty. It begins with openness.

Jesus came looking for people religion left out.

Following Jesus isn't a position to earn it's an invitation to accept.

Following Jesus isn't about rule-following.

- It's about love, relationship, and a story bigger than your own.

God knows everything about you, and you're *still* invited

Jesus invites all of us to something bigger than all of us.

**Invitation:**

As you start your day every day this week...

Pray: Jesus, let me see and accept your love for me. Help me show that love to others.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What part of this message stood out to you the most, and why?
2. Have you ever felt the pressure to conform or "clean up" in order to belong in a community or church setting?
3. Read the passage again (Luke 5:1-11). How do you think Jesus' interaction with Simon is different from how religion typically responds to people's flaws or unworthiness?
4. How might your life look different if you lived each day believing: "With Jesus, I'm already loved. I'm already invited. I'm already free"? What's one way you can live that out this week?
5. How can your group pray with you this week?

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**Transcript:**

**ME:** Churches can be weird.

One thing I've always found weird was churches that have signs that say... All are welcome... or You Belong here.

I get the sentiment, and it's great... BUT...

**WE:** Why does a church, a community that follows Jesus... the most loving person to walk the earth... need to let people know they can belong in the first place?

- Shouldn't all churches be known as a community of belonging?
- Why does it need to be said?

Because religion says: 'Change, and you can belong.'

But Jesus says: 'You belong. Now come and be changed.'"

And unfortunately, most people have felt like they don't belong at church.

The Church—too often—feels like it's for the church people.

- And sure... you're welcome to join—as long as you clean up, change almost everything about yourself...

To which most people say... No thanks!

Maybe you've felt that too... "If they found out who I really was, they wouldn't want me here."

- Maybe felt the pressure to look/talk/pray/act a certain way in order to fit in with the "real" Xians.

Maybe you have kids, grandkids who seem to have no interest in trying out a church community... and it breaks your heart like it breaks God's.

But listen... when Jesus invited people to join him, they rarely said "no thanks"...

- And he is still offering his invitation and building something deeper than what many people have experienced.

See, many people are unwilling to set foot in a church not b/c of Jesus, but religion.

The rules, the judging, the hypocrisy of the religion itself OR the people who say they follow it...

- Never b/c of Jesus.

One of the most common issues people have with religion is its push for conformity.

- Change who you are, become like us, and you can belong.

When we read through the historical accounts of Jesus' life, it's interesting what we DON'T see... No judgment, no list of rules to follow, no membership tests, no requirements for conformity,

So, for the next few weeks, I want to go on a journey with you.

- Not into more religious rules, but into real stories.

We're going to explore five very real encounters Jesus had—and what they reveal about the freedom to follow him without the baggage of religion.

We're going to see... Jesus didn't bring a new religion. He created something better.

- He isn't looking for the polished. He's inviting the thirsty.

If you're feeling a little bit burned out on religion—this is for you.

If you're spiritually curious, disoriented, skeptical... you're in the right place.

If you've ever whispered, "There's got to be more to this than what I've been told," then you're not alone.

Maybe you've stuck with church through it all—but something in your heart still aches for the Jesus beneath the activity. You're not wrong to want more.

We're going to be invited to break free from the pressure of religion...

- Tear up our never-ending list to follow,
- Take off our masks

Jesus never asked anyone to pretend.

- He didn't come to form a club.
- He didn't say, "Get it right."
- He simply said, "Follow me."

By the end of this series, I believe you'll see Jesus more clearly, more simply... and maybe more beautifully than ever before.

And the best part? With Jesus, you're free.

- You're free to ask.
- You're free to wrestle.
- You're free to follow.

So, if Jesus doesn't push conformity, but offers invitation... what does that actually look like?

Let's start this journey at the beginning... his first invitation on the shores of a lake, in Luke chapter 5.

- It's not what anyone expected

**GOD** Luke/ 60-70 AD / Historian/ interviewed the eyewitnesses / Biography

**V. 1-3** *One day as Jesus was preaching on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, great crowds pressed in on him to listen to the word of God. He noticed two empty boats at the water's edge, for the fishermen had left them and were washing their nets. Stepping into one of the boats, Jesus asked Simon, its owner, to push it out into the water. So he sat in the boat and taught the crowds from there.*

Put yourself there.

You're just going about your day, washing your nets after a long night of work...

- probably making the type of jokes that career fishermen like to make

They were just doing what they always did.

- Nothing special about the day

And then this Rabbi walks up.

- "Oh shoot, you think he heard us?"

But notice Jesus steps into Simon's life before asking for anything.

- No expectations. No lecture.... "Now, boys, those types of jokes make God sad."
- Nothing. Just... His presence

Jesus steps into Simon's world first—without expecting belief, change, or repentance.

He doesn't wait for Simon to improve—He walks straight into Simon's normal Wednesday.

- Jesus always starts in our real story.

Religion usually says, "Change, then you can belong."

But Jesus says, "Belong now. Then watch how love changes everything."

And just when Simon thinks the moment is over... Jesus leans in and shows him even more.

**V. 4-5** *When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Now go out where it is deeper, and let down your nets to catch some fish.”*

*“Master,” Simon replied, “we worked hard all last night and didn’t catch a thing. But if you say so, I’ll let the nets down again.”*

Can you imagine what’s going on in Simon’s mind?

He’s tired! Bone-tired.

And let’s be honest—Jesus tells Simon to do something that makes no sense.

- The fish weren’t biting.

Simon knew more about fish than this Rabbi ever could.

- Jesus hasn’t fished. He’s not a professional.
- But he says, “Let’s go deeper. Try again.”

If I were Simon... Ok, buddy. Nice sermon and all. But I’m going home. We can try tomorrow if you want.

And yet... something about Jesus unsettled Peter in the best way.

So he says, ‘But if you say so...’

And in those 5 words... we see what faith really is.

Sometimes all faith is is a shaky “Okay... I’ll try.”

Simon takes a step into the unknown, beyond what “makes sense”, beyond his expertise.

Jesus is calling him to explore the “deeper waters,” both literally and spiritually, to go beyond what he thinks he knows and experience a new reality.

Faith doesn’t begin with certainty. It begins with openness.—even if you don’t have it all figured out.

And when Simon was willing to trust Jesus, his mind is blown!

**V. 6-7** *And this time their nets were so full of fish they began to tear! A shout for help brought their partners in the other boat, and soon both boats were filled with fish and on the verge of sinking.*

Water sloshes over the edges. Wood creaks under weight it wasn’t built to carry.

This wasn’t just a good catch—their boats were about to sink.

That’s so Jesus. He always goes above and beyond when he doesn’t even need to.

They had all they needed from just one cast of a net.

But this wasn’t about showing off. Jesus wasn’t interested in wow-ing them...

- He was showing Simon: When you trust me, I’ll give you more than you could ever imagine.

In this moment, Jesus showed Simon that he was capable of turning scarcity into abundance.

- He took a simple act of faith and transformed it into something Simon and his friends could never have produced on their own.

And it shook Simon to his core...

**V. 8-10a** *When Simon Peter realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, "Oh, Lord, please leave me—I'm such a sinful man." For he was awestruck by the number of fish they had caught, as were the others with him. His partners, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were also amazed.*

Simon knew there was no worldly explanation for what had just happened.

- Simon didn't know the theology—but he knew power when he saw it.
- He knew this Rabbi wasn't just connected to God. He was from God in some way.

And from everything Simon had experienced with things associated with God, he knew he wasn't worthy to be around Jesus.

He had spent enough time with himself and knew his own life, thoughts, and actions, to know this "Jesus" was something entirely other/better than himself.

The religion Simon knew said God was for the rule-followers—the clean, the washed, the ones who said all the right words.

- If you were unclean, you weren't invited

And if Jesus (obviously from God) really knew who he was, what Simon had done, thought, said, who he had chosen to become... he wouldn't want anything to do with him.

Simon assumes what many of us do—that if Jesus knew the truth about us, he'd walk away.

But that's not what mattered to Jesus.

- Jesus came looking for people religion left out.

Religion often tells us that we're not good enough or clean enough to come close to God.

- Something in us intuitively makes us think we're not worthy of Jesus.
- But he doesn't let our self-perception or feelings of shame keep us away.
- He looks past all of it and invites us into something better and deeper than we can imagine.

**V. 10b** *Jesus replied to Simon, "Don't be afraid! From now on you'll be fishing for people!"*

If we were there and knew Peter, I think most of us would have expected Jesus to say...

- "You're right! I'm holy, you're not, get away from me you dirty sinner- you don't deserve to be anywhere near me!"

Jesus doesn't minimize Simon's fear—He redirects it into purpose.

Don't be afraid... That's Jesus' first response to our unworthiness.

- Not condemnation.
- Not silence.
- Just three words: Don't. Be. Afraid.

And then Jesus invites Simon to experience a life of meaning and impact that went beyond his daily work as a fisherman.

- He was inviting Simon to be a main partner in his mission of love and transformation.

Ok but wait! That can't be right!

What repentance speech did Simon deliver? What promises of being a better person did he make?

- None.

What had Peter done to earn this?

- He wasn't seeking Jesus—he was washing nets.
- He was reluctant to trust Jesus
- He smelled like fish and hadn't said a word about repentance.

What had Peter done?! Stop and think about this for a moment... Nothing!

Following Jesus isn't a position to earn it's an invitation to accept.

- Zero prerequisites.
- No entrance exam

The invitation wasn't based on behavior—it was based on relationship.

That's what love does... A child doesn't have to pass a test to be full member of family.

This is what so many of us miss, whether JF or not,

Following Jesus isn't about rule-following.

It's about love, relationship, and a story bigger than your own.

And when you experience real love... it makes the things you thought you needed a little less important.

**V. 11** *And as soon as they landed, they left everything and followed Jesus.*

And their lives were changed forever.

The journey was full of mistakes and missteps... especially for Simon.

But Jesus never kicked them out or demoted them.

**YOU:** And listen, this isn't just Simon's story... it's all of ours.

So many people feel that if their church friends found out who they really were, they wouldn't be accepted.

- We feel bad simply for being who we are.
- We hide our true selves or just give up.

But, hear this... God knows everything about you, and you're *still* invited

- To explore, ask questions, and follow him

There are no prerequisites for Jesus' love and acceptance.

There is no morality test to follow him.

It only takes the willingness to say... Ok. I'll try to trust you.

And if there's never been a point in your life where you have taken that step... today can be the day.

- Whether you've been going to church for 50 years or just these last 50 minutes.

You are invited to move beyond conforming to a religion and enjoying a real life of love, peace, and joy with Jesus.

I'm not inviting you to join a religion—I'm inviting you to follow a man who predicted his own death and resurrection... and pulled it off

- Who changed my life... made me more me.

If you're ready to take that step of trust... just tell him in your own mind/heart.

- Jesus, I choose to trust you.
- Thank you for loving me and dying for me.
- I choose to follow you wherever you lead me.

And for all of us

We were never invited to a religion or culture- we were invited to follow Jesus.

- Invited every day to follow him in what he is doing in the lives of those around you... join in.
- Be open to him using you to love people you wouldn't expect in ways you wouldn't have thought.
- Be open to the idea that this might be more than just a tradition or routine.

Invitation: As you start your day every day this week...

Pray: Jesus, let me see and accept your love for me. Help me show that love to others.

And then come back... b/c the journey gets better!

**WE:** Imagine waking up not to pressure, but peace.

Imagine knowing you're fully seen—and fully loved.

Imagine not being burdened to earn anything, but being free to share what you've already received.

The things that keep people from discovering the real Jesus are the very same things Jesus fought against.

It's so much more and so much better than accepting a religion.

It's about the real you living a real life and discovering and sharing real love.

Jesus didn't come to start a religion.

He came to set people free.

He didn't hand out to-do lists.

He invited people on a journey.

And he's still doing it today.

Jesus invites all of us to bring exactly who we are to something bigger than all of us.

And that invitation still stands... even now.