

“Jesus Invitation ... and Our Response!”
by Rom A. Pegram (11/12/17)

How many of you know John 3:16? If you have one Bible verse memorized, chances are ... that is it. It's a great verse that tells us a *beautiful* truth, isn't it? Quick, say it with me...

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Not bad... It's easy to see why this is one of the most often quoted verses of the Bible. *In just one verse, it tells us that God loves us, Jesus died for us, and that we can have eternal life through him!* It's not even unusual to go to a sporting event and see a big sign held up that says **JOHN 3:16!** But, I've never seen anyone hold up a sign that says **LUKE 9:23**, have you? *Quick, someone say that without looking!* That one may be a little tougher to do... But, Luke 9:23 (NIV) also records the words of Jesus and it says:

“Then he said to them all: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’”

Do you understand now why no one paints Luke 9:23 on a sign to hold up at a game? It's not very appealing is it? Verses like that can make it really difficult to recruit new people to Christianity! But, the truth is ... if we want to be a real FOLLOWER of Jesus, there comes a time when we have to move from a life of *just* John 3:16 to a life of both of these scriptures working together! That's what FOLLOWERS do...

To put today's Bible story in context, let's paint the picture in our minds of Jesus giving his invitation. He's just fed the 5,000 down by Galilee. He's now made his way up to Caesarea Philippi with his disciples—a melting pot of religious activity for their day. It was a smorgasbord of religions; you could have your pick. And here's where Jesus asks the question, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter has just declared that Jesus is the Messiah. Now, Jesus goes on to explain what that means (Luke 9:21-27, NLT):

Jesus warned his disciples not to tell anyone who he was. ²² “The Son of Man must suffer many terrible things,” he said. “He will be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He will be killed, but on the third day he will be raised from the dead.” ²³ Then he said to the crowd, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me.

²⁴ If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. ²⁵ And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed? ²⁶ If anyone is ashamed of me and my message, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels. ²⁷ I tell you the truth, some standing here right now will not die before they see the Kingdom of God.”

Again, these two things have to go together...

- **John 3:16** emphasizes ... believing (but even the devil believes, so we can't stop there)...
- **Luke 9:23** emphasizes ... behavior (the focus here is on—what else—*following*)...

Again, these two things have to go together; *there's no believing without following*; there's no John 3:16 without Luke 9:23, if you're going to be a FOLLOWER! So let's start here...

JESUS' INVITATION (What's it all about?)... Luke 9:23, again, says, "Then he said to the crowd, 'If *any of you* [italics mine]....'" Folks, I want you to know that the 'any of you' Jesus is speaking about here ... really means everyone/everybody. It's an invitation of LOVE ... and we need to understand that *Jesus' invitation is open to everyone!* Jesus doesn't begin with a list of pre-qualifications. His invitation is not just for those who are 'good enough'. And the opposite is also true: His invitation is not kept from those who think themselves NOT good enough! *Did you hear me?* Many think there's no need to bother filling out the application, if it's just going to be rejected anyway ... but that's not Jesus' way is it? His invitation to this new life God's designed for us—one that lasts forever—is an invitation for absolutely everyone ... *regardless!*

There's a story told about a pastor and his wife who bought a house that had white carpet in their formal living room. (Apparently, the childless couple who lived there previously had thought this a good idea...) The pastor's wife had then bought a white love seat to go in that room with the white carpet. (It was one of those deals where it was so cheap it would have been poor stewardship NOT to buy it!) Anyway, the wife laid down the law to their kids about not being allowed in the WHITE ROOM. It was reserved for company...

One day, the wife was straightening up that room, and discovered a secret that someone had been keeping. She flipped over one of the cushions on her white love seat to clean ... and *there was a stain*. She called her husband into the room and showed him the pink fingernail polish blotched on the white cushion; it looked like someone had tried to scrub it, but it didn't come out. Needless to say ... Mama wasn't happy! Well, she flipped the cushion back over so the stain was hidden once again. Then, they called their girls into the room and the interrogation began. As they reached toward the cushion to expose the stain, their middle daughter cracked (It's always the 2nd child, isn't it?) ... and she turned and ran up the steps...

The truth is most of us are hiding some stains ... aren't we? Our worst fear is that someone will flip the cushion over and discover what we've tried to hide. And because we're pretty sure Jesus already knows about our stains, we think that disqualifies us. Surely our stains get our names scratched off the invitation list, don't they? Surely, Jesus wouldn't want us now...

Folks, I want you to know today that Jesus' invitation was for those who knew they were sinners—to become his disciples. When you think of Matthew, for instance, most of us go right to the fact that he wrote one of the Gospels—the Gospel of Matthew; that's what he's known for, right? Too often we forget, however, Matthew was one who—early on in life—had decided *not* to serve God, but only himself. He turned his back on his own people... He collected taxes for the enemy—Rome... There was no such thing, in those days, as an honest tax collector; they were in the biz ... to line their own pockets... *This* is the one Jesus went to and said, "Follow me...." And you and I have a lot in common with Matthew in this way: *As hard as we've tried to scrub the stain, it just won't come out!* The only answer ... is to accept Jesus' invitation, just as Matthew had done...

I've got to finish my little story about the stain on the white cushion... When her parents finally caught up with her upstairs in her room, their middle daughter was still scared. Her dad found her sitting in the bottom of her closet with the door shut. She didn't want to look up when he opened the door. She thought he'd be super angry! Then she asked a question that absolutely melted both of her parents' hearts. She looked up at them with her big brown eyes, tears flowing down her face, and she asked: "Do you still love me?"

I'll just bet that's what Matthew wanted to ask Jesus that day he came to him and said, "Follow me...." *Matthew probably expected a pointed finger and words of rejection; instead, he found open arms and a gracious invitation!* The little girl's mom leaned down to her and said this: She called her by name and then said, "...you could never make a big enough stain to keep me from loving you!" And *that's the way Jesus feels about each one of us...* And so the GOOD NEWS of Jesus continues to this day: the stains that once represented shame and guilt and fear of rejection, now represent love, grace, and acceptance. And folks, THAT KIND OF LOVING INVITATION DEMANDS A RESPONSE, so let me move there for just a moment...

OUR RESPONSE... Luke 9:23 goes on to say, "Then he said to the crowd, 'If any of you *wants to be my follower* [*italics mine*]....'" The line 'wants to be my follower' ('come after me') ... is really describing a passionate pursuit of someone you love! 'Anyone remember what that's like?

It's true that over time, those who are married may be strong in commitment, but the passion has gotten lost along the way. The pre-marital counseling materials I use talk about this. There's kind of a ladder where, if we're not careful, there could be a downward spiral in our relationships, from the dream stage ... down several rungs to what may end up in emotional divorce; this is called 'entropy.' In our relationship with Jesus, *that's not the way it's supposed to be*; it's supposed to remain 'dreamy' and be more like Jesus' story from Matthew 13 (44, NLT). Listen...

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field."

Back in Jesus' day, it was quite common for someone to bury their treasure in a field ... where no one else would find it. So, what if something happened to that person—they died, were taken prisoner, or whatever? Their treasure remained in its hidden place ... until someone came to discover it. That's what this story's all about—that kind of situation...

But, did you see what the man did once he'd discovered the treasure? He hid it again... He sacrificed everything he had in life... Then he got the treasure by buying the field...

He had to sacrifice everything ... to get the treasure. He had to give up everything ... to get the treasure. Why would he do something like that? Because he knew it was worth it! The treasure was worth that much!

So ... *is that the way it is with us and Jesus?* Have we responded to his invitation to a new life by letting go of the old life, so we might lay hold of the treasure that only comes through him? That's the only way the man in this story could get the treasure; and this is the only way we can get the treasure God offers us in Christ, too! We have to be willing to let go ... in order to gain a heavenly treasure in Christ!

In Psalm 63:8 (KJV), King David says this about his relationship with God: "My soul followeth hard after thee...." David, here, is describing his life with God; he's pursuing God with a vengeance! Fellas, do you remember how you chased after your wives (or girlfriends) when you were younger—when you went from "Oooo, yuck, girls!" to ... "I've got to get me one of those!" And you pursued *her* ... with a vengeance (and she loved it, by the way)! That's the way it should be in our relationship with Jesus! We need to respond to his invitation ... by pursuing him with a vengeance! Have you ever thought of your relationship with Jesus in that way? Folks, when we accept Jesus' invitation ... and we are then filled with his Spirit of Love (HS), *that's the way the relationship is!*

It's like the grandmother who went to the graveside some time after her husband's death and turned and looked at her grandson and said, "I'm ready. I'm ready to go home and be with..." and the grandson thought he knew what she was going to say next. He just knew she was going to say "...your Grandpa." Of course she was going to say that; he was the love of her life! But, that's not what she said. What she said was, "I'm ready to go home and be with ... Jesus!" That's the response of a true FOLLOWER—one who's accepted the invitation—an invitation that's for absolutely everyone, including YOU and ME! (Next week, we'll pick up right here—back in Luke, Chapter 9...)