

**“ARE YOU SERIOUS?”**  
**9. Called to a new lifestyle**  
***Luke 5:33-39***

Well, how are we all doing with this discipleship stuff? For some of us this might be quite new, but for many of us the things we've been talking about over the past few weeks will probably be old hat – we know it all and we've heard it all many times before, here and elsewhere. The rubber hits the road, as it were, when it comes to putting it all into practice, actually allowing it to make a difference to your life – allowing Jesus' teaching to influence the way you use your resources; living as part of the community of God's people rather than in a self-centred cocoon; loving each other despite the inconvenience and sacrifice that entails. That's why we've entitled the series “*Are You Serious?*” If you don't want to put it into practice, then really, you're not being serious about it. For many of us, perhaps, all this Christianity business is just something else to fit into our lives along with gym membership, U3A meetings, work commitments and all the rest. It's another lifestyle option we can tack on at some point along with all the other things that are part of our lives, something to do while we're waiting for the shops to open on Sunday, or to fill up that spare hour or two on a weekday evening if there's nothing on the telly.

But being serious about following Jesus, about being a disciple, is all about having a life that is totally driven by our faith. It's about what some people call “Whole life discipleship”, about submitting everything we do to the leading of God's Holy Spirit. Being a disciple is not a part-time hobby or a spectator sport: it's a total immersion in the ways of God and a wholehearted desire to follow Jesus, come what may. And, as always, Jesus has something to say about it, as do the other New Testament writers. We've just read one little section of Jesus' teaching from Luke's Gospel (although this appears in pretty well the same words in Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, too). It starts off, appropriately enough for us on this first Sunday in Lent, with a question about fasting. That's maybe a subject for another occasion. It's what follows that concerns us this morning.

As so often with Jesus' teaching, he uses a question that someone poses (in this case, about fasting) to make a more radical point, to move on well beyond what the questioner was asking. Tom Wright, writing about the wider conversation of which this question is a part, says, “*This passage is full of questions, to which [Jesus'] answer was 'Because everything is different now'.*” Jesus points out the need for wholesale transformation for those who take him seriously – root and branch changes which will affect every part of life. This new stuff he's talking about just can't be contained within or adapted to fit the existing way of going on. Dick France, another great New Testament scholar, says, “*Jesus has brought something new, and the rituals and traditions of official Judaism cannot contain it.*” Jesus uses these two little illustrations to try and get his point over.

We're so used to pre-shrunk fabrics today that we might not immediately get this, but when a hole appeared in an old garment, people would darn it or patch it up with another piece of cloth. If you used new cloth to patch it, cloth that hadn't been already shrunk, you'd find that when you washed the garment, the new stuff would shrink and pull away from the old stuff, leaving an even bigger mess than before. You don't patch old clothes with new stuff – you go and buy (or you make) a completely new garment

And we normally use bottles for our wine, so the idea of putting it into a skin is probably a bit strange to us, too. In Jesus' day, people would sew up an old animal skin to use as a container – like a big leather bag, really. You could put wine into it to keep; and if it was new wine, which was still fermenting, and you put it into an old skin, which was drying out and getting a bit brittle, as the wine brewed in the container, it would cause the dry skin to expand and then burst. (I do actually remember when I was a small boy a bottle of dandelion and burdock bursting open in my auntie's larder – a similar process, I think. A plastic container of elderflower champagne I was making burst in my room at university and took the paint off the ceiling!)

So Jesus is saying that you can't just tinker with things or the whole lot will be spoiled. He wasn't bringing a new way of life that could be patched on to the old stuff. If you were going to be filled with the Spirit of God, which he promised his followers, then you'd need to make sure you could cope with the difference it would make. This isn't about a few minor adjustments to your life, or you won't get any of the benefit. Accepting Jesus' call to discipleship is about starting all over again, about complete change and renewal, which we find it difficult to get a grip on.

Later on in the New Testament, when he is writing to the Christians in Corinth, St Paul puts it like this: *"From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!"* (2 Corinthians 5:16,17). This is going back to first principles, being re-created, starting at the very beginning. Jesus tells Nicodemus it's as radical as being *"born again"* (John 3:3). You can't get much more transformational than that.

*"New creation"* and being *"born again"* are useful phrases, great ways of summing up what this is all about, lovely and poetic and memorable. But they are still a bit vague – and open to misinterpretation as well. (Indeed, the "born again" phrase has been so heavily used by people in some particular parts of the church that it has sadly acquired new layers of meaning which actually put people off becoming Christians.) But what does this look like in practice? Well, we've looked at some of this before, haven't

we? It's the difference between completely changing our way of life and simply modifying our behaviour.

Let's think of our way of life, our attitudes, as the old garment – after all, that's what we come to Jesus with to start with. And Jesus offers us this new idea of the Kingdom, of living as one of his disciples, of taking seriously his call to commitment. We can't just patch that new, disciple-like behaviour on to our old set of attitudes. The old attitudes have to change – our way of life has to be transformed. Otherwise our attempts at new behaviour, our trying to follow in the way of Jesus, will be influenced by all those old ways of thinking. You can't start to talk about loving your neighbour and make attempts at helping others, if your underlying attitudes are those of selfishness and self-centredness. You can't talk about giving all to Jesus if you're still desperate to hang on to your possessions and property. You can't talk about putting others first if your first thought is always to get things done your way. It just won't work! The old attitudes will start to peep through and in the end everything will be worse than when you started. Look again at *Romans 12:1,2*: “*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.*”

It's a question we've asked before, but we'll ask it again. **Are you a lifestyle Christian or do you have a Christian lifestyle?** I've never fallen into the trap of actually watching any of those ghastly reality shows such as *Made In Chelsea* or *The Real Housewives of Boleyn Park* or whatever, but I've seen so many trailers for them that it feels like I know everything about them. It seems to me that they're programmes about people who want to portray a particular lifestyle – and they do that by being very self-conscious about their clothes, their accents, their cultural references, their general appearance. Underneath it all, they're just like the rest of us – sneaky, self-obsessed, materialistic – but they seem to be rich, fast-living and cutting edge.

And there are plenty of people who try to portray a particularly Christian appearance. For one reason or another, they try to bolt on some of the trappings of Christianity – the bits of unshrunk new cloth – without changing the underlying attitudes. So they will come along to worship on a Sunday, go to the odd conference during the year, put a fish badge on their car, talk earnestly about prayer or healing or theology. They might even do some of the stuff that doesn't look too weird amongst their friends – use fairly traded products, try to give a bit to charity, volunteer at the foodbank or night shelter – that kind of thing. But underneath there is still the old focus on themselves, the old desire to look good but not stick out too much. They might even try to justify it all as an attempt to keep in with their non-Christian friends “so they can witness to them” (not that they ever do). That's being a lifestyle Christian, sticking a

bit of veneer on to give the right impression. And when things get tough, the new veneer comes off and the old you is exposed for what it really is.

Jesus is all about having a Christian lifestyle, allowing attitudes to be changed, transformed by the power of his Holy Spirit, following his teaching root and branch, letting God work in your very soul so that every part of you is renewed. It's having a completely new approach to life, looking at things as Jesus would. It means that if you do fast – or whatever – you do it for the right reasons and you know why you're doing it. It means some deep changes to the way you live, think and act. It means transformation in every way. It means moving forward into the values of the Kingdom of God, leaving behind all the selfish and sinful attitudes of the past. There's a bit in the Old Testament, in the book of *Numbers*, where God's people who have been liberated from slavery in Egypt, are looking back nostalgically to the Egyptian food they're missing: “[They] began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.’” (*Numbers 11:4-6*) They forgot the benefits of being free and looked at the stuff that was very much on the surface of things.

Let me ask you that question again – **Are you just a lifestyle Christian or do you really want a Christian lifestyle?** Are you ready for that whole-life transformation that Jesus can bring? Do you want the whole lot changed so that when things don't go quite the way you want it doesn't all fall apart? Are you really serious about being a disciple of Jesus? Jesus can transform your life. Jesus can bring the changes that will help you and will stay with you. Jesus offers you the opportunity to spend eternity with him, in his Kingdom, living life as God originally intended you to – and that can start here and now as you accept his call and follow his ways. Reflect on that and take the opportunity to respond to him this morning – maybe for the first time or maybe as a kind of recommitment, a confirmation of your desire to be serious about being a disciple.

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Responding to Jesus' call to discipleship has transformation at the very heart of it. Jesus has come to make a difference. But this isn't just about tinkering around with things – a few minor adjustments to get things back on track – this is about a radical renewal of everything, everyone. Jesus' teaching in the Gospels gives a very clear indication where he wants things to go. The way in which he brings change demonstrates that this isn't about sticking plasters and pain killers: this is about major reconstructive surgery, about starting all over again.

Jesus uses a question about fasting to make a more radical point, to move on well beyond what the questioner was asking. The new things he's talking about just can't be contained within or adapted to fit the existing way of going on. Jesus uses these two little illustrations about fabrics and wine to try and get his point over. He says that you can't just tinker with things or the whole lot will be spoiled. He wasn't bringing a new way of life that could be patched on to the old. If you were going to be filled with the Spirit of God, which he promised his followers, then you'd need to make sure you could cope with the difference it would make. This isn't about a few minor adjustments to your life, or you won't get any of the benefit. This is about starting all over again, about complete change and renewal.

Look at *2 Corinthians 5:16,17* and *John 3:3*. "New creation" and being "born again" are useful phrases, great ways of summing up what this is all about, poetic and memorable. But in practice we can't just patch that new, disciple-like behaviour on to our old set of attitudes. The old attitudes have to change – our way of life has to be transformed. Otherwise our attempts at new behaviour, our trying to follow in the way of Jesus, will be influenced by all those old ways of thinking. Look at *Romans 12:1,2*.

Jesus is all about having a Christian lifestyle, allowing attitudes to be changed, transformed by the power of his Holy Spirit, following his teaching root and branch, letting God work in your very soul so that every part of you is renewed. It's having a completely new approach to life, looking at things as Jesus would. It means moving forward into the values of the Kingdom of God, leaving behind all the selfish and sinful attitudes of the past (not like the Israelites in *Numbers 11:4-6*). Are you just a lifestyle Christian or do you really want a Christian lifestyle?

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Why do we find change so difficult – as individuals and as a church?
2. Is change always good? Why/why not?
3. Why do we need to change our attitudes (not just our behaviour)? How can we do that? Why do we often find it so difficult? How can we cope when our attitudes seem to be at odds with the attitudes of so many around us?
4. What are the most important elements of a Christian lifestyle for you? In what ways does that really show that you are serious about being a disciple of Jesus?
5. In what ways is a Christian lifestyle a good witness?
6. What are you actually going to do about this? How can we encourage one another in it?