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VERITAS

Equipping Christians to live by truth—veritas—from God.



IT'S TIME TO

LET GO

OF OUR NETS!

*A Challenge
to Become
Authentic
Followers
of Christ*



**By Dr. Joseph
Stowell, III**

DALLAS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

DISTINGUISHED SPEAKER



Joseph Stowell, III, serves as the president of Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. An internationally recognized conference speaker, Dr. Stowell has also written numerous books, including *The Trouble with Jesus, Following Christ, Simply Jesus and You*, and *Radical Reliance*.

Dr. Stowell is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M. 1970) and served as president of Moody Bible Institute from 1987–2005. Prior to accepting the presidency at Cornerstone, he served as a teaching pastor at Harvest Bible Chapel, a church of more than 10,000 people in suburban Chicago.

Dr. Stowell also works with RBC Ministries in Grand Rapids, partnering in media productions. His Web ministry, *Strength for the Journey* (www.getmorestrength.org), features daily devotionals, weekly messages and commentary, downloadable Bible study curriculum, and an audio library of his most requested messages. He also serves on the board of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Dr. Stowell and his wife, Martie, are the parents of three children and ten grandchildren. He presented this message to a recent gathering of Dallas Seminary friends and supporters.

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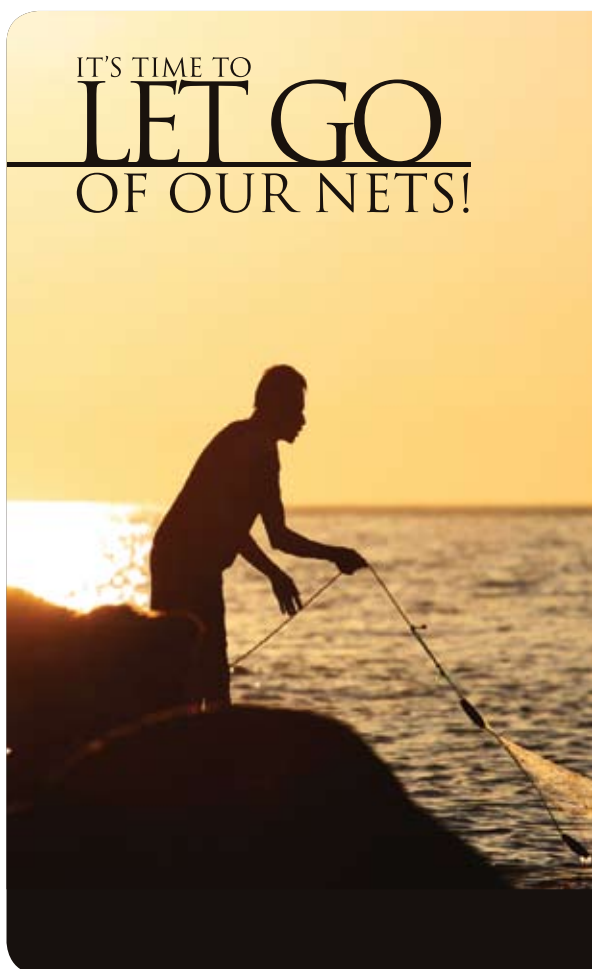
Veritas is a publication of Dallas Seminary for our valued friends and partners, designed to provide biblical encouragement and instruction in keeping with our strong commitment to minister to those who stand with us in prayer and financial support. We are pleased to present the messages of outstanding leaders and Bible teachers who speak during chapels and at other events, as a way of bringing you “on campus” with us and giving you the benefit of their insights. *Veritas* is also available online at our website, www.dts.edu/veritas.

Joe Stowell says the moment we trusted Christ as our Savior, we gained our true identity as His followers. This is crucial because it is our identity as Christ's followers that should determine the way we live. Jesus showed us what it means to follow Him when He called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to be His disciples. Christ challenged them to put aside anything that would keep them from being fully devoted to Him. And in this very practical and challenging message, Dr. Stowell shows us what it means to "let go of our nets" and follow Christ.

I read about a time when former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher was campaigning for office. While greeting the residents of a nursing home, she stopped to speak to one woman in the corner whose eyes were rather glazed over.

Mrs. Thatcher greeted this lady and asked how she was doing, but the lady just looked at her in desperation. So Mrs. Thatcher asked her, "Do you know who I am?"

The woman looked up and said, "No, but that nurse over there helps us with those kinds of things." Knowing who you are is a vitally important thing!



Our Identity Must Be Tied to the Person of Jesus Christ

Knowing who you are is a vitally important thing! So allow me to ask you this question: Who are you? If we were to sit down and have a cup of coffee together to discuss this, my guess is that you might begin by telling me about your profession, what you do for a living. Or because I'm a preacher, you might think I was looking for a religious response, so you might say, "I'm a Presbyterian" or "I'm a Baptist."

If our conversation went in any of those directions, my response would be, "Those are all fine, but that's what you do for a living and where you go to church. What I'd really like to know is, who *are* you?"

But if you were to think for a moment and then say, "I am a follower of Jesus Christ," you would have gotten it right. When we went to the old, rugged cross and Jesus welcomed us to Himself and to His family, at that point we gained our true identity as followers of Him. Our sense of identity is very determinative of the way we live.

I also am a follower of Jesus Christ, but I suspect that a lot of us who identify ourselves in this way have never really stopped to think what that means and how our identity as Jesus' followers should define and dictate our lives.

In Matthew 4:18–22, Jesus Himself unwraps for us what it means to be His followers when He meets four of His disciples for the first time. Matthew recalls that as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers—"Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew"

Our Calling Is to Let Go of Our Nets and Follow Jesus

(v. 18). They were casting their nets into the sea because they were fishermen. This was their profession, their career. Their occupation was their whole sense of personal identity. If you were to ask Peter, “Who are you?” he would say, “I’m a fisherman.”



But Jesus was about to change all of that, not only for Peter and Andrew, but also for James and John, by saying to them, “Come, follow me . . . and I will make you fishers of men” (v. 19). Jesus was about to change these men from being fishers of fish to fishers of men. That’s what I call a career upgrade!

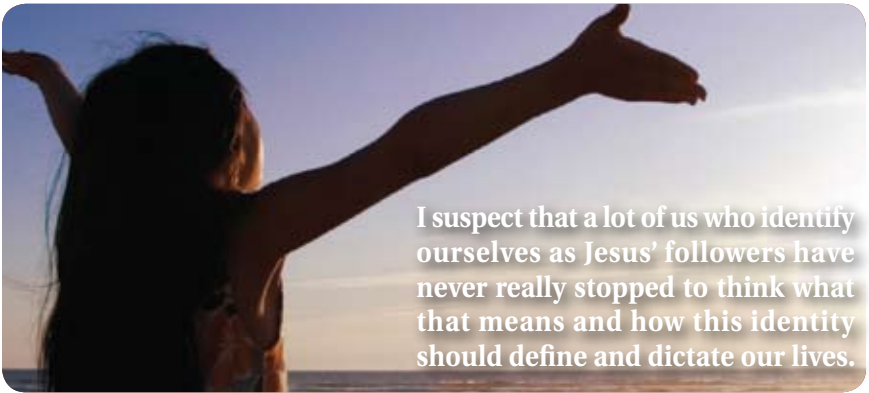
Most of us get up in the morning saying, “I am going to make something of my life, and I’ll follow Jesus too.” But I just want you to know that we can’t have it both ways. We have to have the formula right. “Follow Me,” Jesus said, “and as you follow Me, I will make something of your life.” So these men heard Jesus’ call—but here’s what shocks me in this text. I read in Matthew 4:20 and 22 that both sets of brothers *immediately* left their nets and followed Jesus.

When I read this, I think about putting myself there. If I were a fisherman whose livelihood depended on the nets I was holding in my hands, before letting them go I probably would have wanted to negotiate with Jesus for a moment. You would too. We would want to know, “Is this short term, or do I have to give my whole life to it? Is there a 401k plan? Is this going to be challenging? Do I get sick pay?”

In other words, our tendency would be to hang on to our nets. But as long as the disciples clung to their nets, they were going nowhere with Jesus. It seems to me that we all

have nets in our lives. My net is anything that inhibits or prohibits my capacity to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. Maybe you know what your net is too—that thing you think of when you say to yourself, “If I were to become a fully devoted follower of Christ, I’d have to let go of ____.” And then you fill in the blank.

But the disciples immediately let go of their nets. I think the reason their act of commitment and surrender strikes us as strange is because we have forgotten who Jesus Christ really is and how compelling this Man is. I think we have this Sunday school picture of Jesus in a neatly pressed robe and sandals, with a well-trimmed beard—a nice guy, rather harmless, but not very compelling.



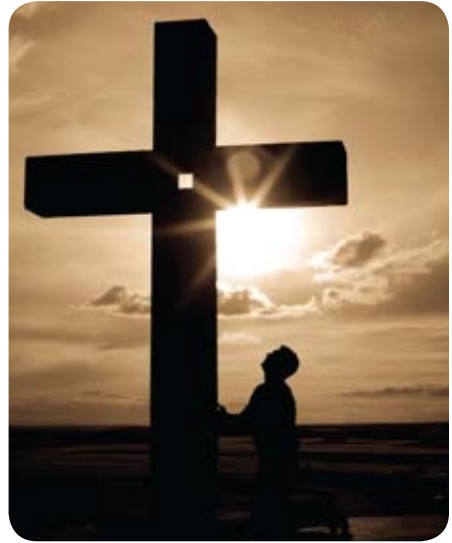
But that's not the Jesus who calls us to let go of our nets and follow Him. These men He called were rugged fishermen, who worked in a profession filled with guys who had tattoos on their tough biceps, who showed up at the diner at 5:00 in the morning, jamming their cigarette butts into an overflowing ashtray, talking about politics and cussing out Rome. These were tough men who wouldn't have been compelled to change their lives by a Sunday school Jesus. But He confronted them and called them, and they threw down their nets and followed Him.

Our Calling Is the Highest Honor We Could Ever Receive

I want to show you something very important about the calling that Jesus gave to the disciples because it has profound implications for us today. The culture of Orthodox Judaism in which Jesus and the disciples lived helps us understand more deeply what was involved in Jesus' call to Peter and his friends to be His followers and why it was the highest honor they could possibly receive.

The word that Matthew used for "follow" in our story is rich with meaning. It literally means "to be found in the way" with Jesus. In the Orthodox Judaism of Jesus' day, followers were a subgroup of people who, in their hearts, had a longing to know God. And to get that longing satisfied, they would attach themselves to God's local representative, the rabbi.

These people who wanted to follow a particular rabbi would move into the compound with him and sit at his feet as he was teaching them, listening to every word. They considered it their highest privilege to serve him, in even the smallest ways. They



Our tendency is to hang on to our "nets." But as long as the disciples clung to their nets, they were going nowhere with Jesus.

would watch him and imitate his dress and even his mannerisms—so much so that even in Jerusalem where there were many rabbis, you could tell which rabbi a person followed because he would act, talk, and respond just like his rabbi-teacher. Even Jesus said a well-trained student would become like his teacher (Matthew 10:25).

So these students would follow their rabbi, but at age 12 or 13 a cut was made, so to speak, and only the really brilliant students had the privilege of asking the rabbi if they could commit their lives to being his followers. The ordinary students who didn't make the cut at this point went back into the trades, such as fishing.

Every Jewish student went to rabbinical school, to a point, but only the top students went on to this higher level. Think about what this meant for Peter and other fishermen Jesus called. They were the losers as far as society was concerned—the guys who didn't make the cut. But what an honor they were given when this soon-to-be headliner Rabbi, Jesus Christ, called them to be His followers. The rabbis of Israel would never ask their students to follow them. The students had to ask to follow.

Let me bring this down to us today. My friend, we were all losers from God's standpoint. We weren't making the cut. But the God of creation walked down the beach of our lives in the Person of Jesus Christ and said to us, "Follow Me." I hope we never get over the wonder of that honor!

Our Response Is to Follow Jesus as He Makes the Path

Remember I explained that the word Jesus used in Matthew 4, which is translated "follow," was a very rich word in Jewish culture. The student who followed a rabbi

for the purpose of learning from him and imitating him and becoming just like him was said to be “in the way” with that rabbi.

This is what Jesus was calling the disciples to do—to let go of their nets, leave their way of being fishermen, and follow Him in the way He would blaze for them as their way-maker and path-setter. The response that Jesus’ call demanded was to accept that incredible honor and leave everything else to become His follower.



This is our call today—and it demands the same response from us. If we are going to be authentic followers of Jesus Christ, we must be with Him in the way.

Have you ever thought about how profound it is that Jesus came into our world, which is full of the broad ways that lead to destruction, ways that are packed with foot traffic, and cut through the jungle of our lives to make whole new paths? That’s what He is doing in the world today, and as Jesus makes the way, He looks over His shoulder and asks if anyone is in the way with Him.

The only right response we can make to that call is to follow Jesus! But I want you to know that following Him can be a shocking experience, because the path Jesus is making takes us off the path we are used to walking.

For example, Jesus shocked His disciples when He said, “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44). The talk on the street was that you love your friends and hate your enemies. But Jesus cut a

new path at that moment and asked, “Is anyone with Me in the way?”

On another occasion, Jesus’ disciples were arguing about who would be the big shots in the kingdom of God (Mark 9:33–34). Jesus corrected their thinking because they weren’t on the path He was cutting. Then later He reminded them that as followers of His, their calling was to serve, not to be served, because that was His calling as well (Mark 10:45).



No matter where you turn in Scripture, you discover that Jesus left us in no doubt about what it means to be His authentic, fully committed followers. That leaves us with just one problem—those nets we are still holding.

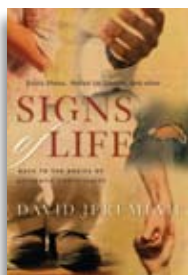
For Peter and his friends, their nets represented their profession. But as long as they held on to their nets, they weren’t going anywhere with Jesus. They may not have made the cut in terms of being able to follow the great rabbis of Israel—but on the shore of Galilee, they were being given the profound privilege of following the wisest Teacher of all. All they had to do was let go of their nets.

You and I must do the same—because true followers of Jesus are “netless” believers!

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SIGNS of LIFE

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH'S NEW BOOK SHOWS YOU HOW TO
BE TRANSFORMED INTO CHRIST'S IMAGE—AND CHANGE YOUR WORLD!



Just as there are physical signs that determine the overall health and wellness of a patient, so too there are signs of life determining the extent to which a man or woman has been transformed into the image of Jesus. A person who is intent on becoming an authentic follower of Christ—someone who has “let go of the nets”—will give evidence of that commitment.

In *Signs of Life*, bestselling author, pastor, and Dallas Seminary alumnus Dr. David Jeremiah leads readers through a 40-day journey to a fuller understanding of what these signs are and how we can be marked by them in our individual lives. This journey pursues a life characterized by relevancy, surrender, authenticity, generosity, and compassion. And in so doing, such lives transform individuals, communities, and nations.

Whether you are new to the Christian faith or considered an “old-timer,” *Signs of Life* will help you discover what being transformed personally into the image of Jesus means—and be equipped with a greater vision for the life you have been freed to live.

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(FOR SUBSCRIBERS) OR CALL 800.DTS.WORD x3722. THANK YOU!



Dr. Mark L. Bailey

Making Authentic Followers of Jesus Christ

One of the privileges I have as president of Dallas Theological Seminary is to rub shoulders with and to hear great biblical preaching from our graduates.

I had such an occasion recently when Joe Stowell delivered the message at a luncheon for our Dallas Seminary friends. Like the other people in attendance that day, I was deeply challenged by the imagery Joe evoked of Jesus' disciples holding on to their fishing nets as the Lord called them to be His followers.

Those men immediately dropped their nets and followed Christ, which, as Joe brought home so clearly, is like our challenge as followers of Jesus Christ today. We have to let go of whatever it is that may be keeping us from wholly following Him.

As I reflected on Joe's message, I couldn't help but breathe a prayer of gratitude for servants of Christ like him who "dropped their nets" and left other careers to follow Christ's call. For Joe and more than 12,000 other Dallas Seminary alumni like him, that call included coming to our school for their ministry training.

I could tell you many stories of the sacrifices that our students make to leave all and come here to prepare themselves for ministry. But then, I also know that their sacrifice would be pointless if they came to a campus that was not fully prepared to provide them with a Christ-centered education.

Providing that requires the sacrificial giving and prayers of many friends like you—and I could not be more grateful to you! One of the ways we have of thanking you for your commitment is to send you *Veritas* as a way of encouraging you as you follow Christ.

Our desire to help you grow in Christ is only right, because it is your prayers and financial gifts to Dallas Seminary that enable us to prepare godly leaders like Joe Stowell. We continue to rely on your commitment—and we continue to thank God for you daily!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Bailey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Dr. Mark L. Bailey
President
Dallas Theological Seminary