

Sermon January 14 – John 1:43-51  
*Changed by Jesus: Frogs into Princes*

We live in an era in which credibility, or the lack of it, has become a significant issue. There is a credibility gap between parents and children, between those who are in authority and those under them, between races, between governments, and yes, even in churches. Credibility is also an issue when you and I attempt to bear witness for the Lord Jesus Christ. What about our credibility? What must we know in our witness to unbelievers to be credible? I will give you eight points. We must understand that God's saving work has been done in our lives and done forever. We must know and accept that we are sinners. We must surrender fully to God. We must spend time with Jesus. We must be grounded in the great truths of Scripture. We must be firmly planted and rooted to bear good fruit. We must be willing to do hard work. Lastly, everything we do must be characterized by love.

There are many skeptics today. People who find Jesus an exciting person may perhaps privately admire him yet reject the Christian faith in its entirety. For the sake of curiosity and the idea that maybe it would be easier to believe the gospel, would it make any difference if we could have been with the disciples and, of course, Jesus himself as he gives the Sermon on the Mount? I think that the question for us is how the church can convince these skeptics. We all know people hear things about the church from a distance, which convinces them the church is a bad thing. It should come as no surprise that people prejudge the church without actually getting to know it, but the church must also ask itself whether it has failed to offer people reasons why they should "come and see." Do we, the church, thoughtfully offer people a clear vision for life? Some churches provide a mixture of entertainment and superficial spirituality that satisfies in the short term but leaves people empty, especially when the difficult questions and problems of life arise. However, if we are convinced that the Christian faith holds the truth about human life, then we must, in all honesty, show people how that truth makes sense. We will learn that John reminds us that it is not only marvelous signs that lead to faith. Jesus prayed that his disciples and we, too, might be one so that the world might believe when people see families and churches living out the truth of the gospel, offering people a coherent vision for life. Let's pray

**Father, we come praying for those seeking the truth about your Son Jesus. We pray for all who are willing to be witnesses. We have heard your Son say: "Listen, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come and have dinner with them, and they will be with me." Help those who are honest about finding the truth and fulfill your promise to all who seek a loving personal relationship with you. In this, we pray, Amen.**

Back to the previous question: Would it make it any easier to believe the gospel if, perhaps, we could go back in time and be with Jesus and hang out with his disciples? After all, the disciples were not highly educated, well-dressed, or outwardly impressive. They were skeptics at first, ordinary people, and perhaps you would notice their dirty fingernails, the callousness on Philip's big toe, and the missing teeth that were obvious when one of the other disciples grinned. Maybe in surprise, you would see how short and stubby a couple of them were and would note the poor speech they often employed.

We need to forget about books illustrating pictures of handsome disciples with well-groomed beards, sporting robes worthy of a crowned prince, or depictions of the disciples as clean white people wearing the ancient equivalent of Armani designer suits. Yet somehow, the rag-tag group of uneducated fishermen was in touch with the most profound truth and secret of the universe—ordinary men who changed history by their witness. Ordinary and straightforward men of transformation. Almost everybody has a soft spot for fairy tales where there is this intrigue about a reversal of expectations. Take, for instance, when finding out that the frog is really a handsome prince and that the ugly duckling is the one that grows into the most glorious of all swans. Imagine if all the disciples were brought together into one room. Would we ever, in our wildest dreams, look at them, a weak-looking pack of ordinary folks, missing a tooth here and there, and dirt under their nails, smelling like fish, and know they would change the world? Essentially, that is what happened because it was to them that the secret of the universe was first revealed. That is why Jesus called them, and if we are going to change the world, we must start somewhere. Yet it was the messengers who fit the message, and when necessary, it was Jesus who slapped them back down to the street level when they argued amongst themselves as to who was the greatest or angling for power. It was Jesus who kept them humble and ordinary-looking.

The disciples needed to be simple, ordinary, and, above all, humble if they were going to do Jesus any good and change the world. That is why Jesus called them. But in the calling process, there was something curious, a craftiness about Jesus. There is something in this story that is amazing. Something Jesus knew that he revealed out of the Old Testament—a reference to a key figure: Jacob and the way he came to faith. For some odd reason, God liked Jacob despite all the stunts Jacob had pulled, especially with his brother Esau, a childlike maneuver snagging all the power he wanted by stealing the blessing of his birthright so that he could survive. Jacob tried to barter for less than what he had, yet later in life, when Jacob finally wrestled with God, there was a sign of progress and a renewed blessing through his brokenness. Through the grace of God, a simple child-like faith emerged in Jacob. The star witnesses of this story are Philip and Nathanael.

It was the descendant of Jacob, Nathanael, an Israelite after the flesh, who was also struggling with God. In verse 45, after Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote- Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” In reply, Nathanael says, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, Jesus said of him, here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. Basically, Jesus says, you are right, Nathanael, I am not much to look at. But I’ll let you in on a little secret: I’m the One, and when I saw you under the fig tree, you were in the presence of God!

In verse 48, Nathanael asks Jesus, “How do you know me.” In reply, Jesus says, “I saw you while you were praying under the fig tree before Philip called you. Then Nathanael declared, Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel. Jesus said, you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that. He then added, very truly I tell you, you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” It is the place of Jacob’s ladder dream at Bethel, the “Stairway to Heaven” scene right out of Genesis 28:12. Jacob, taking one of the stones there, put it under his head and lay down to

sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”

The point of the whole Bible is getting a reboot, a fresh start. To enter the kingdom of God, we need to be like innocent little children. We need a little holy innocence to believe that in that small band of ignorant fishermen, a cosmic treasure lay hidden. The disciples, as it turns out, are the frogs who turn into princes, for God knew what was happening in their hearts. They were praying and searching. When it comes down to it, we should look at ourselves in the mirror and realize that we are no more impressive-looking than the disciples we meet in the Gospel story. Sadly, the world still thinks the church looks like a dead end. New Atheist authors like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have publicly sneered at people of faith and have used words like “immature,” “retrograde,” and “childish” to describe what they think of people like us. Richard Dawkins has publicly quoted that people who go to churches on Sunday mornings are no different than people who believe in the tooth fairy, in river sprites, in spirits who inhabit elm trees. Before his death, Hitchens wrote, “The teachings of Christianity are immoral that have done and continue to inflict untold moral and physical harm on our species. Until we outgrow this nonsense, we have no chance of liberating ourselves. Everything about Christianity is contained in the pathetic image of the flock.”

Who was this man Nathanael whom Philip went to find? Many scholars consider him to be Bartholomew and one of the original twelve apostles of Jesus, to whom Philip brought his friend to Jesus. When Nathanael accepted Jesus’ call, he became his disciple. Nathanael makes just one other appearance in the Bible at the end of John’s gospel after Jesus had been killed. Standing on the beach of Galilee one morning when at breakfast, Jesus said to his disciples, come. He took the bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were open! No longer was there any doubt who this stranger on the beach was. The story of Philip and Nathanael is one of incredible witnessing. As it turns out, the frogs who turn into princes are the disciples. Initially, it was Philip who went out and found someone he could share his joy with. How about you? Do you have the excitement and joy of a Philip to go out and share Jesus with others? Are you like Nathanael, who is praying and meditating on God’s Word? Are you ready to get up from under the tree to “come and see”? Are you prepared to witness the mediator between heaven and earth by becoming a disciple of Jesus? It is the expression of faith, willing to share breakfast with the King and investigate for yourself that Jesus is the Son of God, the King of heaven and earth.

Church growth begins with inviting people to come and learn to live the gospel message. At the end of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus did not have thousands of adoring followers lining up to hear him—just a few fearful women at the end standing at the foot of his cross. No, Jesus said strange things, like Follow me, and I will make you fishers for people, or if anyone wants to be my disciple, they should take up their cross and follow me. Jesus spoke about strange new ideas. People think the church should grow because we need more people. We need more people to step up, to pledge to the budget, to teach Sunday school. To be relieved of the burdens of getting a break. The problem is, friends, the mission of the church is, sadly, not about you and me. The mission of the church is about God, about God’s redeeming work in the world, about living that out and making room for others to join us in that living. The idea of growing the church is a nice side effect, but it is not the goal. The goal is about God. Yep, a radical message to soak in.

Brothers and sisters, turn your eyes upon Jesus and meditate on living life as servants and the wonderful work of God to transform this world. In this, I pray, Amen.