

THE OPEN INVITATION

Good morning! We're going through this series called "Not a Fan". It's based on a Bible study series written by Kyle Idleman which is based on his own book with the same title. Last week, in the first message of this series we were confronted with the question of "Fan or Follower?" We tried to identify the difference between a fan and a follower. We said that a fan is an "enthusiastic admirer" while a follower is someone who is totally committed. Now, I hope your home group met last week. If it did, you got more insights of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. And on a personal level, I hope you had a DTR with Jesus. You defined your relationship with Jesus. Are you a follower or are you merely a fan?

Today, as we continue this series we're going to look at a particular word in Luke 9:23. First, let us read it together: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." That is our memory verse for this series. Now, let's blank out the screen. Let's recite this from memory.

The word that I'd like us to look at this morning, which we're going to dwell on in this message is the word "anyone".

Now, anyone is a word that in the business world is used casually. Have you ever seen one of those car dealership commercials that says, "Anyone can buy a car here!" But then you look at the fine print at the bottom of the screen and see that "anyone" really means the people who pass their credit check. Or have you ever tried to get a special deal on a cell phone plan and the commercial claimed this new deal was for anyone? Only to be told that discount only applies to those with good credit? So, it sure seems like whenever people say "anyone is welcome," or "anyone can cash in on this deal," they don't really mean anyone, do they? There's always a catch. But when Jesus says, "anyone" he really means "anyone."

Over the years, however, we've gotten to the point that even when we hear Jesus say "anyone" we think, "Yeah right. What's the catch?" There's no catch. No small print. No hidden fees. It's all laid out in that verse, and it's open to "anyone." And when Jesus said "anyone," the crowds would have looked at his disciples and known that He meant it.

This morning, we're going to look closely at the word "anyone" in the context of Jesus' words. We're going to look at what its implications are, what it means to us.

So, let me start by saying what Jesus meant when he said "anyone" is that

1. Anyone Is Welcome

You have to understand, to his society, Jesus was a rabbi. Homeless, unconventional, but a rabbi nonetheless. And a rabbi was a teacher of God's Word, which was then the Old Testament. Rabbis had extensive knowledge of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and all of the writings of the prophets.

Rabbis were also special because they had a group of "talmids". The word talmid translates to "disciple" or "student." So, essentially, every rabbi had a class of students. This was an incredibly exclusive group of students. Most people, however, didn't end up as students of rabbis. In fact, those who didn't make the cut most often ended up learning some sort of trade, typically one that was passed down in their family. They'd work as stonemasons, fishermen, carpenters, or tradesmen.

For those students wanting to become one of the talmids of a particular rabbi, they had to go through an application process. They had to meet certain requirements and those requirements were heavy.

Here in the States, if you want to go to Harvard, you better have a 4.0 GPA, or a 32 on your ACT, or a 1600 SAT score.

In the Philippines, during my time, you had to pass the NCEE or National College Entrance Examination to be able to get into college. Then, if you want to get into an elite or a prestigious university like the University of the Philippines, you have to pass the UPCAT or the UP College Admissions Test. Moreover, your UPCAT score must be acceptable to the course that you're applying for. So, you have to be screened thoroughly before commencing college. Well, it's the same with a talmid applying to join a rabbi's school.

Talmids had to have an impressive knowledge of Scripture, and a rabbi would quiz a prospective talmid, asking them to recite an entire book, or to tell him the number of times the name of the Lord was used in the eleventh chapter of Leviticus. This was an intense, painstaking process. But rabbis had to be thorough, because the excellence of the student reflected the excellence of the teacher. If a rabbi just let anyone in, it was clear he was not a sought after teacher. On the other hand, if a rabbi's group of talmids were especially brilliant, the rabbi would be respected and admired. But then Jesus changed the system, especially when he invited a tax collector to be a talmid.

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So when word gets out about a new rabbi who is picking out followers at random, people started to wonder what was going on. They came to hear from this incredible teacher named Jesus, but when they looked at his disciples, they must have been confused. They must have shook their heads and thought, "These are his students? They're nobodies! Those two used to be fishermen, a few of them are just political hotheads, and that guy's a tax collector!"

But then Jesus made the invitation, and when people heard that anyone could come learn from this incredible rabbi, I'm sure they started to entertain the idea. People who had given up the dream of learning from a rabbi a long time ago were now wondering if they'd be welcome in this new rabbi's group.

And slowly but surely, people started to come and wanted to follow this rabbi Jesus. They realized when He said “anyone,” He meant it.

When Jesus said that anyone was welcome, the crowds began to understand that everyone was welcome. No exceptions. Which brings us to the second point of this message. If anyone is welcome, then

2. Anyone Means Everyone

But here’s the struggle: though we’d never say it, we don’t always buy into the idea that church should be for just “anyone.” We kind of like the church the way it is, don’t we? We usually prefer things to stay the same. And “same” soon becomes standard, and pretty soon a standard becomes a qualification. I think Jesus knew that’s how things would go, and I think Luke 9:23 reminds us that there shouldn’t be any qualifications.

So Jesus does away with the qualifications to follow. He got rid of the long list of prerequisites; he did away with the standard application process. And I think the Church as a whole should do away with some of our qualifications.

There are churches that have an unwritten dress code. Men and women are expected to dress this and that way. Some churches also have an unwritten political code. And in most churches, there have been all kinds of things added to their unwritten code. Whether or not you should listen to this or that style of music. What your income is. What your social agenda is. What your church denomination is. The list stacks up pretty quickly. Sure, the church keeps saying “anyone is welcome.” But when you look at how the members dress, or what political leanings they prefer, or what style of music they accept, it becomes clear that there are some qualifications.

But Jesus didn’t just get rid of the qualifications. When Jesus said, “anyone,” he did something else. In eliminating the qualifications, Jesus got rid of all the excuses. Which leads us to

3. No Qualifications Means No Excuses

You see, when Jesus invites anyone to follow him, He doesn't just break down the barriers that keep so many people from learning more about God. He also gets rid of all the excuses different people were hiding behind. So now the tradesman had no excuse not to follow a rabbi. Now the drop-out student couldn't complain about his past anymore. Now the mother of four couldn't say she never got a chance to learn from a rabbi.

So what has your excuse been? I think most of us have been holding off on a relationship with Christ because we say we're busy. So what is it for you? Is it because you're too busy putting in hours at the office? Is it because you've really been focusing on your marriage lately? Is it because the kids need a lot of time and attention? Is it because times have been tough and you just got a second job?

Others say it's because they've got a past they're not proud of. So the baggage from the addiction or the divorce or the bankruptcy has been an excuse for a long time. It's easy to hide behind those kinds of excuses, because who's going to argue with someone who's been through a tragedy, or someone who's been emotionally scarred? But Jesus gets rid of all the excuses when he invites "anyone."

Anyone is welcome to have a relationship with Jesus. Anyone.

Sexual past? Anyone.

Ex-con? Anyone.

Inmate? Anyone.

Recently divorced? Anyone.

Legalist? Anyone.

Alcoholic? Anyone.

Addict? Anyone.

Hypocrite? Anyone.

Now, we need to be ready for what can happen when we embrace the invitation to “anyone.” Because if anyone can come to church, that’ll kind of mess things up. All of a sudden, the church gets filled with a lot of “un-churched” people. If we really accept “anyone” into our churches to follow Christ, we’ll be forced to deal with our unwritten codes. We’ll be forced to get out of our comfort zones and rub shoulders with people from different backgrounds and social circles, people who have different music collections and recreational activities than us, people whose wardrobes confuse or annoy us, people who are hard to tolerate and even harder to love. But followers are willing to break down walls, trash the unwritten codes, and welcome “anyone” into God’s family right alongside Jesus.

Some of you are probably thinking, “Wait a minute! We can’t just let anyone into our church! We can’t just let people show up and invite them into God’s family and tolerate anything they want. That’s not Biblical!” And you’re right. That’s not Biblical. I’m not saying we tolerate or condone anything sinful. When a person wants to become a Christian, it’s right to make sure they understand what God’s Word allows and what it doesn’t.

But when Jesus makes the invitation, he says, “anyone.” So some of the people who respond to that invitation will have a past that you don’t approve of. Some of them will have been involved in lifestyles you’d be embarrassed to hear about.

Fans don’t know how to handle new people like that. They prefer not to know. Fans prefer things to be shallow and comfortable. But followers are willing to listen, willing to hear stories of brokenness and sin and still welcome those people with open arms.

Let me tell you the true story of Amy. This story I’m going to tell you is taken from a book by John Burke, pastor of Gateway Church in Austin, Texas.

“Let’s just go for fun! We’ll see how much we can push their buttons,” Amy teased her girlfriend, who didn’t like the idea of hanging around a bunch of Christians. “Come on,” Amy insisted. “I hear their motto is ‘Come as you are.’ I just want to prove that they’re ‘come as you are’ . . . unless you’re gay.”

Amy had been in a nine-year lesbian relationship that had broken up, leaving her wondering why her deepest longings could never be satisfied. She and Rachel had just started hanging out when they decided to attend one Sunday morning.

“I came on a mission to shock people,” Amy admits. “Rachel and I would hold hands in front of people, but instead of the disgusted looks of contempt we expected, people met eyes with us and treated us like real people. So we started coming to church weekly. We kept moving closer to the front each week, trying to get a reaction so that we’d be rejected sooner rather than later. When we couldn’t shock people, we stopped trying and started learning.

“Not long after that, Rachel and I stopped seeing each other, but I kept coming to church because I was searching for something,” Amy admits. “I definitely wasn’t looking to change. It wasn’t my lesbian lifestyle that I was bringing to God, but I wondered if God had answers to my deeper longings. Problem was, I didn’t trust God at all!

“The more I listened and learned about the teachings of Jesus, the more I started to actually believe that God really did love me. I heard more and more about being his Masterpiece, and in time, I actually started to believe it. The more I believed God actually could see something of value in me, the more I trusted him.”

Over time, Amy slowly opened her heart and struggles to Christ. “It took several years, but as I moved closer and closer to Christ, he gently took me on a very surprising journey. First, I found out my father had nine affairs while I was growing up—a secret that rocked my world.

Jesus began to show me how the roots of my sexual issues tie together with my dad's—I was just like him, using people to find comfort, life, and love outside of God.”

Amy continued to grow in her knowledge of the Scriptures, falling more and more in love with the Lord. The following year, God had another surprise for her: “I went to the seminar called ‘To Be Told,’ hosted at Gateway. I wanted to see how God could put closure to my brokenness, but what he showed me shocked me,” Amy recalls.

“As Dan Allender was telling a story of a bully, I suddenly had a flashback of getting off the school bus. I lived down the street from Jimmy, a boy who had bullied me all year. But this particular day, Jimmy acted nice to me as I got off the bus,” Amy recalls.

“He apologized for being so mean, and he invited me to come to his house.” That day in the seminar, all else faded to black as this vivid nightmare crept back to life. Amy saw herself walking through Jimmy's front door, noticing all the shades pulled down. Startled, she spied two teenage boys eyeing her with a ravenous look as the door slammed shut. Her screams never escaped the evil darkness that enveloped that house. They pinned her down and raped her. She was only nine!

Amy swam in a pool of tears as the seminar continued. Others were oblivious to her divine epiphany. She realized the Lord had been drawing her near to strengthen her for this revelation—to show her the source of so much sexual struggle hidden for years beneath layers of protective mud.

“After that, I realized God knows more about me than I know about myself,” Amy recalls, “and he wants to bring healing to these wounds, so I fully gave him my heart and body—everything. As I continued to seek intimacy with him, the lesbian struggles fell away.

I'm not saying that's how God works with everyone, but it's how he's healing me. The more I focus on God's intimate love for me and try to see his Masterpiece emerge, the less I want anything to get in the way of his work in me."

Seven years later, Amy leads a ministry to help people find healing and wholeness from all kinds of sexual and relational struggles. She's helping others become God's restored Masterpiece.

Amy found healing because that church welcomed her like Jesus would. She could have made excuses to not let her journey continue but Jesus removed all the qualifications. So, with Jesus, anyone is welcome. Anyone means everyone. No qualifications means no excuses.

And finally, this next point is crucial to making sure that we help all—both brand-new Christians and long-time believers—move into a completely committed relationship with Jesus.

4. It's Anyone, But It's Everything.

When Jesus makes His invitation, he welcomes anyone who would come after Him. But He also makes clear that when you choose to follow Him, you are giving up everything. So it's anyone, but it's everything.

When a talmid was finally accepted into a rabbi's school, they would leave their homes, their jobs, whatever was holding them back, and they would go and follow the rabbi. Literally, they would follow the rabbi wherever he went.

(Object Lesson: Get a volunteer out of the congregation. Ask that person to follow wherever I walk.)

So if the rabbi decided to go to the market, his students would follow. And if a rabbi decided to go to another town, his students would follow. If the rabbi needed to visit some sick in the area, his students would follow.

Now, to follow the rabbi named Jesus, this would cost even more. Because if the rabbi decided to live without a home, his students would follow.

And if Jesus the rabbi decided to go among the sinners and the shameful, his students would follow. And if Jesus the rabbi decided not to flee from persecution, his students would follow.

And, folks, that's what Jesus offers. The greatest teacher who ever lived offers you the chance to become one of his students. And when he says anyone, he means everyone. And with no qualifications, you've got no excuse. But even though He makes his invitation to anyone, He also guarantees that it will cost you everything. Are you ready? Are you willing to follow the rabbi Jesus?