

# **UN**FOLLOWERS

SERMON NOTES

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These sermon notes are to be used in conjunction with *Unfollowers: Unlikely Lessons on Faith from Those Who Doubted Jesus* by Derek Cooper and Ed Cizewski (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2014).

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# CONTENTS

About These Notes	4
1. John the Baptist	5
2. Healing at the Pool of Bethesda	6
3. The Rich Young Ruler	7
4. Judas Iscariot	8
5. Caiaphas	9
6. Road to Emmaus	10

## ABOUT THESE NOTES

**D**erek Cooper and I wrote *Unfollowers* with small group study in mind, and we've provided this six-week series of sermon notes for the pastor who wants to preach through the book, even as their congregation's small groups are working their way through it.

Although *Unfollowers* adopts an unusual approach to the gospel stories, the questions and challenges it raises are grounded in the everyday choices and struggles we face as followers of Jesus. Jesus challenged his original audience, asked difficult questions, and showed a way to life that was anything but easy and intuitive.

*Unfollowers* aims to capture the tension that Jesus created. We found this book to be among the most challenging projects we've ever worked on, and we hope and pray that your time with it will be both as convicting and encouraging as it was for us to write it.

—Ed Cyzewski

# **1 JOHN THE BAPTIST**

## **LUKE 7:20-23**

Anyone can doubt Jesus.

*Unfollowers* pages 27–40

### **INTRODUCTION**

John had the all-important ministry of announcing the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah. While he correctly identified Jesus, he also harbored significant doubts when Jesus didn't meet his expectations. John's faith wavered at a decisive moment in his life, but Jesus' response offers us encouragement in a story that shows anyone can struggle with doubt—even a God-appointed prophet.

### **SERMON OUTLINE**

#### **I. John Had Every Reason to Believe**

With an angelic announcement of his mission, a dove flying through the sky over Jesus, and a voice from heaven declaring the identity of Jesus, John had every reason to believe that Jesus was the Savior of the world and the Messiah. His entire life mission was preaching about Jesus. While he grasped his own role, he wasn't ready for a Messiah like Jesus.

#### **II. John Doubted Jesus**

When Jesus failed to challenge the sins of Herod, criticize those Jews who attempted to take the land by force, and the injustices of Rome, he couldn't make sense of a ministry that remained in the margins of society. John may have challenged Herod over his marriage because Jesus didn't.

#### **III. Jesus Invited John to Believe**

We may imagine that Jesus would be disappointed and angry at John's failure to believe. Instead, Jesus gave John an invitation to change his expectations about his mission as a messiah, inviting him to believe. While the story of John ends on a chilling note with his execution, we're left with the hope that John heeded the message of Jesus and came to recognize Jesus' role in bringing forward God's kingdom.

# **2 HEALING AT THE POOL OF BETHESDA**

## **JOHN 5:1-15**

Do we want to be well or right?

*Unfollowers* pages 126–144

### **INTRODUCTION**

The pursuit of holiness can alienate us from God if we make our religious observances more important than our actual relationship with God. Jesus challenged the religious leaders of Judah to seek rest in God on the Sabbath rather than making the Sabbath a mark of their faithfulness.

### **SERMON OUTLINE**

#### **I. The Purpose of the Sabbath**

The Sabbath became a badge of religious identity. Those who violated the Sabbath, as interpreted and enforced by religious leaders, faced exclusion from the religious community. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, he directly challenged the teachings of the religious elite because he fundamentally disagreed with them over the purpose and observance of the Sabbath.

#### **II. The Judeans Exhausted Themselves over the Sabbath**

Following the rules for the Sabbath was demanding. In fact, the mark of observing the Sabbath often boiled down to external practices rather than inner questions related to a relationship with God or creating a restful space for worship. Religious practices divorced from relationship will always wear us out rather than restore us.

#### **III. Jesus Restored Life on the Sabbath**

The original mission of the Sabbath was to restore life and to give space for worship and reflection. Rather than focusing on a series of rules on the Sabbath, Jesus pointed the religious leaders in Judah to their “heart issues.” In fact, Jesus didn’t argue about whether he was breaking the Sabbath. He wanted to talk about using the Sabbath to restore life and freedom. The man Jesus healed was faced with a choice: Do you want to be made well? He had to choose between following the rules of his community or finding new life in Jesus.

# **3 THE RICH YOUNG RULER**

## **LUKE 18:18–30**

The one question every disciple must ask.

*Unfollowers* pages 95–110

### **INTRODUCTION**

Although many affluent readers today may think that Jesus alienated the rich young ruler by asking him to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, Jesus was actually providing this young man with an opportunity to be free. In fact, there would have been no more certain way to know he had prioritized eternal life than selling his possessions in order to follow Jesus. However, this isn't a story about how much we need to give away. This is a story about what gets in the way of following Jesus.

### **SERMON OUTLINE**

#### **I. What Do We Want from Jesus?**

The rich young ruler wanted something that no one else wanted from Jesus: validation. He wanted the latest religious teacher to validate that he had a lock on eternal life because he observed the law and enjoyed material prosperity. He suffered from the “bias of affluence” which associates God’s approval with material possessions.

#### **II. What Marks Faithfulness?**

We all have our markers for blessings and faithfulness: money, a happy family, or personal peace. Jesus told the rich young ruler that living perfectly and assuring himself of eternal life had more to do with what he left behind than what he accumulated or practiced.

#### **III. What Keeps Us from Following Jesus?**

Jesus asked the rich young ruler to sell his possessions because that was the most certain path to freedom in his particular situation. This is not a template. This story is an invitation to ask what keeps us from following Jesus. Whether rich or poor, Jesus invites us all to follow him, but the path to freedom will remain costly for each of us.

# **4 JUDAS ISCARIOT**

## **MATTHEW 26:1–30**

Seeking plan B for wavering faith.

*Unfollowers* pages 111–125

### **INTRODUCTION**

Although Judas’s betrayal of Jesus makes him a larger-than-life villain, he is, in many ways, an understandable character who had specific plans about God’s will. When he realized that Jesus’ plans didn’t match his own, he simply devised a plan B that would solve all of his problems: betraying Jesus in order to secure money to start over and the good will of Jerusalem’s leaders. However, Judas’s plans fell apart when Jesus was sentenced to die, and he never recovered from depending so completely on his own plans rather than believing in the message of the Messiah.

### **SERMON OUTLINE**

#### **I. Judas Served His Own Plans**

While Judas may have said that he wanted the Messiah to come, he ultimately used Jesus to serve himself. He stole money from the donations to Jesus’ ministry, and he schemed to start over when the ministry of Jesus appeared headed for destruction. His treasure was far from heaven, and his repeated reliance on stealing and bribery show just how little faith he had.

#### **II. Judas Formed a Plan B to Save Himself**

Judas didn’t understand the message of Jesus about laying down his own life in order to save it. Judas relied on his plans rather than the words of Jesus. In fact, the only way to save himself was to betray Jesus. By putting himself first, he became last in accordance with Jesus’ upside-down kingdom.

#### **III. Judas Is the Foil to Peter’s Childlike Faith**

Much has been made of Peter’s denial of Jesus, but in the end, he held on to belief in Jesus even after his failure. While Peter relied so completely on Jesus that he didn’t know where he would go, Judas knew exactly what to do when he learned about Jesus’ death. Judas relied on his own plans rather than the faith-demanding promises of Jesus. While plans can be good when yielded to the direction of God, Judas assumed that God’s plans must match his own. When they didn’t, he formed a new plan rather than getting on the same page with Jesus.

# **5 CAIAPHAS**

## **JOHN 11:45–57**

How unbelief leads to compromise.

*Unfollowers* pages 160–174

### **INTRODUCTION**

Reading the story of Caiaphas today, we find a cold, calculated murderer who uses political intrigue in order to force the Romans to do his dirty work. However, if we dig into his story, we're met with a series of fascinating questions. How did the high priest of Israel become a murder conspirator? When did deadly pragmatism overrule the law of God? Why did a high priest have so little faith in the power of God as manifested in Jesus? The story of Caiaphas is like a magnifying glass into the impact of unbelief on our lives.

### **SERMON OUTLINE**

#### **I. Caiaphas Was a Religious Atheist**

Caiaphas occupied a religious position that carried a great deal of political weight, and he lived essentially as if God didn't exist. While Caiaphas may have wanted a Messiah, he had virtually ruled out the possibility that God could work miracles. Even raising Lazarus from the dead made Jesus more of a threat than a Savior. Caiaphas wanted to control events, and Jesus was far too unpredictable for his liking.

#### **II. Caiaphas Compromised Because He Was Primarily Practical**

With God's power out of the picture, Caiaphas relied on his own practical solutions. Over the years he no doubt yielded to political scheming and power plays that had very little to do with the justice and mercy of God. By the time he saw Jesus potentially provoking a Roman invasion of Israel, he didn't hesitate to suggest that it would be better for Jesus to die than for the whole nation to perish.

#### **III. Caiaphas and Jesus Had One Big, Ironic Thing in Common**

By the time Jesus died on the cross, Caiaphas also thought of himself as the savior of Israel. However, he had hatched his own plan completely apart from the direction and power of God. While he appeared to have similar intentions as Jesus—preserving Israel from destruction—his lack of faith led him down a path of compromises. He had departed from the ways of God so dramatically that he even refused to enter Pilate's fortress in order to remain ritually pure, even though he was putting an innocent man to death—God incarnate, in fact.

# **6 ROAD TO EMMAUS**

## **LUKE 24:13–35**

God pursues runaways.

*Unfollowers* pages 175–186

### **INTRODUCTION**

It's most likely that the disciples on their way to Emmaus had been told by Jesus that he would rise from the dead, but they didn't believe him. Rather than risk their lives by sticking around in Jerusalem, they headed out of town trying to piece together what they had just witnessed. Even though they failed to believe in Jesus and even left town when the other disciples remained to pray, Jesus stayed with them, traveling with them despite their doubts.

### **SERMON OUTLINE**

#### **I. The Disciples Had Every Reason to Believe**

It's likely that the disciples along the road to Emmaus had witnessed miracles and had listened to the teachings of Jesus about his coming death and resurrection. Even with a good theology taught by Jesus himself and convincing experiences, they struggled with doubt.

#### **II. The Disciples Had Every Reason to Run**

These disciples had just witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus, and they knew that they could be next. They had everything to lose by sticking around in Jerusalem to pray with the other disciples. It made perfect sense to run for their lives. Little did they know that Jesus pursued them even when their faith faltered and they petered out.

#### **III. Jesus Revealed Himself over a Meal**

Although Jesus spent an entire journey explaining his life and the prophecies he fulfilled, the two disciples didn't recognize his identity through a conversation about Scripture. They learned much, but the decisive moment for their faith was a personal encounter with Jesus at the table. When answers fail us, a meal in the presence of Jesus may be exactly what we need.