

Practicing the Way Series

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By JOHN MARK COMER

Who is Jesus of Nazareth?

We often think of Jesus as the Son of God (deity) or the Messiah of Israel (“the Christ” — the long awaited promised king of Israel who would become the king of the world), but if you were a first-century Jew watching Jesus and listening to him teach in the local synagogue, there is a first-century category that you would have immediately placed him in — Jesus was also a “Rabbi” (a *Teacher*).

A rabbi would travel from town to town with his *yoke* (his set of teachings and way of reading the Torah/Scriptures). Of the 90 times that Jesus is referred to in the Gospels, around 60 of those times (67%) he is referred to as Rabbi or Teacher. And so that has all sorts of implications for what it means to follow Jesus.

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

— Mark 1:16-20

He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.

— Mark 2:13-14

And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons. He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

— Mark 3:13-19

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?

— Mark 8:34-37

What is Jesus Calling People To Do?

Notice that he is not saying, “Hey believe in me so you can go to heaven when you die.” It was a very straightforward call and invitation... “Hey, come follow me. Come be my disciple.”

Disciple (n.) — a student, apprentice or practitioner. **The goal of a first-century disciple was to be with your rabbi all the time in order to become like your rabbi and to do what your rabbi does.**

So What Does It Mean to Follow Jesus?

Following Jesus means that you order your entire life around these three basic goals:

I. To be with Jesus (*through a relationship with the Holy Spirit*)

“This means that the first and primary goal of apprenticeship/discipleship to Jesus is learning to live in a constant state of awareness of and connection to the Holy Spirit.”

— John Mark Comer

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

— John 15:1-8

“The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our minds... This is the fundamental secret of caring for our souls. Our part in thus practicing the presence of God is to direct and redirect our minds constantly to him. In the early time of our “practicing” we may well be challenged by our burdensome habits of dwelling on things less than God. But these are habits — not the law of gravity — and can be broken. A new, grace-filled habit will replace the former ones as we take intentional steps toward keeping God before us. Soon our minds will return to God as the needle of a compass constantly returns to the north. If God is the great longing of our souls, he will become the pole star of our inward beings.”

— Dallas Willard

2. To become like Jesus (*aka. sanctification or spiritual formation*)

“Spiritual formation in the Christian tradition is a process of increasingly being possessed and permeated by the character traits (of Jesus) as we walk in the easy yoke of discipleship with Jesus our teacher...”

— Dallas Willard

We are all being formed into the image of something so the question is not “are you being formed”; the question is “who or what are you being formed into?”

Take a minute to examine your life over the last several years: Who or what are you becoming?

Becoming like Jesus takes practice, and it takes practice in community.

3. To do what Jesus did

Jesus' Kingdom Work:

Preaching the gospel of the kingdom, teaching the way of the kingdom, healing the sick, casting out demons, eating and drinking with people far from God, doing justice, peacemaking, praying, prophesying, standing up against religious and political corruption, etc.

Our job is not to just know a lot of stuff about Jesus; it is to join in on the kingdom work that he started.

So what does it mean to follow Jesus?

- Be with Jesus
- Become like Jesus
- Do what Jesus did

Think about the difference between what it means to be a Christian versus what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Think about the difference between this idea of “asking Jesus into your heart” versus Jesus' call to “deny yourself and follow him.”

Would you simply identify as a Christian (part of the church-crowd) or are you a disciple of Jesus?

“The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heart breaking needs, is whether those who are identified as “Christians” will become disciples — students, apprentices, practitioners — of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom into every corner of human existence.”

— Dallas Willard

“Jesus is not looking for converts to Christianity; he is looking for apprentices to the kingdom of God.”

— John Mark Comer

This kind of life won't just happen; it takes a life built around practice and community. Notice the way that Jesus even begins and ends his famous Sermon on the Mount (teaching on the kingdom way of life) with this idea of putting his teaching into practice...

Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them (or practices them) and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

— Matthew 5:19-20

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them (puts them into practice) will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them (does not put them into practice) will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

— Matthew 7:24-27

What is 1-2 thing(s) you can do to begin building your life around practice and community?