

Lesson 5

Follow Jesus (2)

Introduction

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Matthew 16.24

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

Luke 14.27

Understanding who Jesus was in history and what he did in his ministry, knowing facts about him is one thing—but actually knowing Jesus is another thing. In reality, just knowing about Jesus and the narrow way he described won't do anything for helping us find the way in our spiritual lives. We can know intellectually what it means to follow Jesus by reading about it or hearing about it. Jesus never called us to know what the path looks like. Jesus called us to walk the path that he walked before us.

Jesus was not like the religious teachers of his day. Jesus' goal was not to educate people about a set of facts or even just to get them to agree with them. He didn't care about backgrounds, titles, who you knew or appearances. Nor was Jesus interested in politics, gaining public approval for the purpose of influence, or addressing the government to create some sort of societal change. Jesus was not about trying to fit the mold of the culture. Jesus was not concerned with helping people become "relevant," "cool" or "fashionable."

Jesus does not want admirers. He wants followers. The entire ministry that Jesus lived out was to make the way straight for broken, imperfect and lost people to make it home to a completely perfect God. He went to every length to show us and to invite us not just to know about him... but to follow him.

For discussion:

1. What did Jesus say his purpose was in his ministry?
2. What is the difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus?

How Lost We Are

The overwhelming majority of scholars attest to the historical Jesus. Even known skeptic and agnostic textual analyst Bart Ehrman made this statement;

“Today nearly all historians, whether Christians or not, accept that Jesus existed and that the gospels contain plenty of valuable evidence which has to be weighed and assessed critically. There is general agreement that, with the possible exception of Paul, we know far more about Jesus of Nazareth than about any first or second century Jewish or pagan religious teacher.”¹

Bart Ehrman

In addition, the fact that Jesus was crucified for what he preached is nearly universally accepted by all New Testament scholars, believers or otherwise.² Everything we’ve learned about Jesus up to this point is pointing toward this fact—the one who tried with everything that love would permit to make his own love known to us was crucified by the people he tried to save for his message. Jesus’ crucifixion shows us what our sin does to the God that loves us. That singular event simultaneously shows us how much God loves us and just how unloving we’ve been to our God. It exposes how lost we really are without him.

The crucifixion of Christ was not expected by his disciples. His claims of being the Messiah caused them to be rallied in hopes that the Jews would finally give the oppressive Roman regime what they deserve. Therefore, it was extremely discouraging to the disciples when Jesus was killed by the Romans in such a brutal way. They should have expected it, though. The Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament and Jesus own prophecies spoke to this matter—the Messiah would be slain for the sins of men.³

For discussion:

1. Was Jesus real in history? How do we know?
2. Was he crucified? Why was he crucified?

But If Christ is Risen...

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—

... the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.

Romans 5.12, 15

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins...

but in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

1 Corinthians 15.17, 20

¹ B. Ehrman, 2011 *Forged : writing in the name of God*. p. 285

² Dunn, James D. G. (2003), *Jesus Remembered*, Wim B. Eerdmans Publishing.

³ see Isaiah 53, Matthew 20.17-19

The path that we walk every day is affected by the problem of sin. We live in a world that is in a fallen condition—it is a broken version of the original product. As a result of sin, death came into the world. This is the ultimate problem that we all face. All the ends that we pursue are stopped by the curse of death. Jesus provided the way out of every dead end.

If Jesus died and raised from the dead, then it not only brings great credibility to the rest of the scriptures that testify to this event, but it also brings great significance to our own lives. If the resurrection is true, then every other word about Christ becomes simultaneously authoritative and possible. If Jesus is raised, it is the single most important historical fact to everyone who ever lived.

Why should we believe Jesus really did show the way out of the mess of this fallen world by conquering sin and death? Here are just a few reasons:

1. Though Jesus' body was buried in a Jewish tomb⁴ and guarded by Roman soldiers,⁵ none of his enemies could produce his body. (This would totally shut down the ministry.)
2. Jesus' original disciples, though previously terrified of Roman authorities—suddenly and mysteriously became emboldened to preach even in the face of being stoned, burned alive or crucified themselves testifying to his resurrection.
3. The execution and resurrection of the Messiah was predicted in multiple texts in the Old Testament which was written long before the New Testament. There is no way the Old Testament authors could have predicted Jesus' life unfolding in the way that it did. Yet they continually alluded to the suffering and vindication of the Chosen of God.⁶

For discussion:

1. If Jesus is raised, what does that mean for us?
2. What do you think about the conditions of Jesus' burial? What does that tell us about the disciples claims about his resurrection?
3. What changed the disciples' attitude after Jesus' death?
4. What are the odds of the prophecies in the Old Testament lining up with the evidence corroborating the New Testament accounts?

⁴ see Matthew 27.57-60

⁵ see Matthew 27.65-66 ...”make the tomb as secure as you know how.”

⁶ Genesis 3.15, Psalm 16.10, Hosea 6.2, Isaiah 53 are some examples.

The Way is Clear

Jesus crucifixion lays two realities before us—we are lost in our sin because we have erred from the path such that we can not make our own way back. Our sin has pinned the God of Heaven to a cross. Jesus' crucifixion is a visual symbol of the damage we have done to our relationship with God. We see how far we've fallen when we see our sin played out before our eyes. We can't make our own way—when we try to do that, we always twist the true path and end up doing violence to the God who loves us. This is a very real problem.

The problem of sin can only be overcome in Christ. Lost as we may be, we have a guide and a trailblazer in Jesus Christ. God has not left us abandoned, he has come down to walk with us and shown us a way back home. Jesus, in his life and in his ministry, has cleared the way for us.

The Path of a Disciple

For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Matthew 7.14

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Matthew 11.30

How is it that Jesus makes both these statements regarding the path set out for his disciples? Well, it's important for us to understand definitions, perspective and mission of a disciple.

Defining discipleship. A disciple is a learner. A disciple of Jesus is intent on mirroring his love, gentleness, patience and justice in every way. A disciple is hungry for knowledge and open to where ever God may lead them. A disciple is a sponge for Jesus' teachings and eager to pour them back out into the world.

The context of Jesus' call to discipleship. The difficulty of following Jesus is sacrifice. We know that he lived this sacrifice and that his early disciples lived lives of sacrificial love based on the New Testament accounts. Still despite the difficulty, they were filled with joy, peace and purpose as they praised God together being filled with the reality of their salvation. This is what Jesus means when he says "my yoke is easy."

The mission of a disciple. Jesus was a disciple maker. He taught his disciples to find faith in God, live that faith and share it with others. He sent his disciples to share the message of life that he brought.

So, being a disciple and walking the narrow way is hard in one way and easy in another. It is hard in that there will be challenges, difficulties, doubts and even persecution. It is easy in that Jesus will aid us and breathe grace into our lives as we veer off the path and make the necessary corrections. It is easy in that we will have a varied host of blessings to tap into all along the way. It is easy when we know and understand the reward of making it home to Heaven.

For discussion:

1. How can following Jesus be hard?
2. How can following Jesus be easy?
3. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?

Prayer for today—*God, help me to learn to be a true disciple of the teachings of your son Jesus. Help me to find the way that he has set before me.*