



Following Jesus Christ

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As Jesus traveled throughout Israel urging people to repent and believe the gospel, “Follow me” was a constant refrain in his message. At the beginning of his ministry, he called his first disciples with the terse command, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” As his ministry progressed, he told the crowds, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). At the end of his earthly ministry, he recommissioned the repentant Peter with the words, “Follow me” (John 21:19).

Have you ever probed the meaning of this phrase? If not, you should, because it can lead to a profound, transforming change in how you think about and live the Christian life. Perhaps this article can help get you started.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? Following Jesus begins when we respond to his call to repent and believe the gospel. The Good News that God loves us and has taken the initiative to reconcile us to himself by giving his Son to atone for our sins awakens us to God’s grace and moves us to want to live for Christ and follow him.

When we turn our attention to what the Bible shows us about how to actually follow Jesus in daily life, two things stand out immediately: understanding and obeying his teaching and following his example. Let’s take them in turn.

For his first disciples, hearing and obeying Jesus’ teachings were fundamental to following him. This is evident in the fact that soon after calling them, Jesus gave his disciples the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), an extensive in-depth teaching on life in the kingdom of God - what we might call basic principles of discipleship or the Christian life. At the conclusion of this sermon, Jesus emphasized with striking clarity the

profound importance of hearing and obeying this teaching:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them 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 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 (Matt. 7:24–27).



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The point Jesus is making in these words is that building one’s life on obedience to his teaching is wise and will sustain his disciples in the challenges they will inevitably encounter in life, just as building one’s house on a foundation of rock will secure it against the forces of nature that will assault it. Disobedience to his Word is folly and leads to ruin, as surely as building a house on sand will result in utter catastrophe when those same storms come. If we want to follow Jesus, then, we will certainly want to begin where the first disciples did, with understanding and obeying the foundational teaching in this sermon. And from there we will go on to study his teaching elsewhere in the Gospels.

Following Jesus also involves following his example. In the Upper Room, after washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus said, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet, For I have given you an example, that

you should also do just as I have done to you” (John 13:14–15). The lesson Jesus was teaching is the importance of serving one another in humility of heart and of becoming servant leaders. This was a critically important lesson they had been slow to learn and washing their feet was an extraordinarily effective way of making the point. Sometimes, seeing a concrete example makes a greater impact on people than yet another statement of principle. This is but one instance of his example we are to imitate. A careful reading of the Gospels will reveal others.

It could rightly be asked, what is the value of simply following an example? Can’t that lead to a kind of external, works-oriented mentality? It can, if we are doing nothing more than external imitation. The key is our motive. If we are earnestly seeking to please Jesus out of love, it can awaken a new understanding and deeper appreciation of the act we are performing. We all know that our thoughts can lead us into taking action, and our feelings can lead into action as well. But we often don’t realize that our actions can lead us into a different way of thinking or feeling. Consider, for example, the suburbanite who volunteers in an inner-city soup kitchen out of a sense of duty or maybe guilt. Through the experience of getting to know the poor and their problems, a deep and genuine compassion can emerge that changes the volunteer’s motive for serving and transforms that person into a true servant of the poor. So it is with following the example of Jesus. It can change us inwardly and help us become in our hearts what we are doing with our hands.

Following Jesus, then, entails both obeying his teachings and imitating his example. But this is not the sum of the matter. For obeying and imitating are not ends in themselves but are means to a greater end. That end or goal of discipleship is to become like Jesus himself: to think as he thought, to feel as he felt, to act as he acted, desire what he desired. As John puts it, “Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6). Because Jesus is the image of God in human form (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1: 3), as we become more and more like him, the image of God is increasingly restored in our lives.

A key part of this process is gaining a clearer knowledge of Jesus as he is presented to us in Scripture. And a time-honored way of doing this is to consistently and prayerfully read the Gospels and reflect on the life and teaching of Jesus. As we immerse our minds and hearts in the gospels, two major defining characteristics of his life stand out with striking clarity: faith and love. Secure in the love of God and his own sonship, Jesus lived with an unshakable trust in his heavenly

Father and wholehearted love for God and others. If we want to become like Jesus, faith and love must become defining characteristics of our lives, too.

Let’s turn now to a brief look at faith in the life of Jesus. The picture of Jesus that emerges in the Gospels is of a man who lived his daily life in conscious, trusting dependence on his Father in heaven. Consider, for example, how his resistance to the Devil’s temptations in the wilderness reveals an unshakable faith in God and his Word (Matt. 4:1–11). Or his dependence on the Father in the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:40–43). Or his confidence that his Father would raise him from the grave (Mark 8:31). In each instance, Jesus has absolute trust in his Father. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than when he agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, wanting to be spared but submitting to his Father’s will on the cross.

Jesus not only lived a life of faith before his disciples, he called them to live a life of faith as well. First and foremost he called them to put their trust in him as Messiah and Son of God. But he didn’t stop there. He called them to an active, living faith in their heavenly Father in the affairs of everyday life. Whether for daily bread or power to heal the sick and cast out demons or to overcome the perils of nature, they were to live by faith and to grow in faith. Each challenge they encountered was an opportunity for growth. They were slow to learn the lessons of faith, and most of us probably identify with them and give them a pass. But Jesus never did. When the disciples were in danger of drowning in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus upbraided them for their fear and lack of faith (Mark 4:35–41). When they were unable to cast out a demon, he told them it was due to their lack of faith (Matt. 17:14–21). Growing in faith was a very important part of maturing as a disciple. He expected them to grow in faith as they saw his mighty deeds, and he expected them to trust God to answer their prayers—even to “move mountains” to advance his kingdom.

One of the saddest commentaries on the church in the West today is the weakness of our faith. Secularism has seriously eroded our belief in the almighty, miracle-working God of the Bible, who answers the prayers of his people and intervenes in the affairs of the world. We have embraced a reductionism that acknowledges faith in Christ as essential for salvation but largely ignores the necessity of living by faith thereafter. How many of us really live each day with a confident trust in God to do what he says he will do? How many of us take him at his word and act with the expectation that he will be faithful? This is the kind of faith that Jesus calls us to exercise as we seek to follow him. It is the kind of faith we see in William Carey,

the father of modern missions, who said, “Attempt great things for God, expect great things from God.” Or Hudson Taylor, the famed missionary who opened up China to the gospel. Or George Müller of Bristol, who over many decades, by simple faith in God and his word, prayed in the finances to feed, clothe, shelter, and educate thousands of orphans daily without telling anyone but God of his need. (If you want to be strengthened in your faith, read *The Spiritual Autobiography of George Müller*.)

Of course, such faith does not suddenly appear in our lives. It is something that grows over time as we read, mark, and inwardly digest God’s Word with the help of the Holy Spirit and prayerfully act on it in the obedience of faith. When we do this, God uses the needs, opportunities, and circumstances of our lives as a training ground to help us grow in faith, fulfill his purposes, and bring him glory. At the heart of following Jesus, then, is walking by faith in God, just as he did, and not living by reliance on our own limited wit, wisdom, and resources.

The other major defining characteristic of Jesus’ life was love. Jesus lived a life of love. He loved his Father with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength. And he loved others and sought their good.

This may sound commonplace to those who have been in church for a while. And we may wrongly assume that we know what it means. Our ideas about love may be shaped by unrecognized cultural assumptions and may be far from correct. Thus a brief examination of Jesus’ teaching on love may prove helpful.

The cornerstone of Jesus’ teaching on love is found in the Great Commandment:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:34–40).

The first of these two commands, found originally in Deuteronomy 6:5, lies at the heart of the Old Testament’s teaching about how God’s people are to relate to him. Before they ever knew him, God loved Israel and chose them to be his special people. He demonstrated his love by rescuing them from slavery, giving them a land flowing with milk and honey and promising them great blessings in the future. In return, he asked for wholehearted love and devotion, to be expressed in obedience to his covenant.

Jesus teaches that God still seeks the wholehearted love of his people and that responding to his love is to

be our highest priority. Thus we should spare no effort in seeking to grow in love. But what is love? Have you ever pondered that question? In pop-culture and contemporary usage, the word love is closely associated with feeling and sentiment; this tends to color our thinking. It is easy for us unconsciously to sentimentalize the call to love God and reduce it to a matter of feeling. But while feeling is certainly a part of loving God, it is not the heart of the matter. In the Bible the essence of loving God is to give ourselves fully to him who first loved us, to surrender to his love and devote ourselves to him. That is the point of “*all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, and all our strength*” (italics added). Just as a woman gives herself to a man who deeply loves her and asks her hand in marriage, so we are called to give ourselves to the God who loves us and has redeemed us at the price of his own dear Son. Far from being an arbitrary demand, this command is an entreaty of love.

You may wonder how you could possibly love God this way. To be sure, it is not a natural human ability. Paul tells us that “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). And this love grows as we continue to live a gospel-centered life, meditating on and reminding ourselves daily of God’s love for us and Christ’s sacrifice for us. Assurance that God loves you deeply evokes an answering love for him that increases over time and is essential to living the Christian life.

What does this kind of love look like in daily life? The answer may surprise you: obedience to God’s will as found in Scripture. According to the Bible, obedience is the acid test of true love for God. Jesus makes this clear when he says, “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15 NIV). So does the apostle John, who says, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3 ESV). If we love God, his commands will not be burdensome or irksome to us. Rather, we will desire to obey him. Do you desire to obey God and bring him pleasure through your obedience? The more we ponder and marvel at the good news of the gospel, the more we will want to please him.

Some people today mistakenly equate obedience with legalism and see it as the enemy of grace. But actually the opposite is true. Legalism comes from trying to earn God’s favor by obedience and sacrifice. The Pharisees were famous for this, and we can easily fall into it today by insisting on commitment and obedience without grounding it in grace and love. Obedience offered in love is the fruit of grace and is an antidote to legalism.

The second part of the Great Commandment, to love our neighbor as ourselves, originates in Leviticus 19:18 and reflects the nature of God and his deep concern that we seek the good of others and bless them. Again, many people are confused about what it means to love our neighbor, thinking that it means to feel emotional warmth, sympathy, or closeness toward them. However, the *agape* love that is enjoined here is not primarily emotional in nature. It is chiefly volitional, an act of the will. It is acting in the best interest of the other person, seeking their good, regardless of how you happen to feel toward them. Jesus makes this very clear when he says: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12). This is a wonderfully liberating command, because while it is not possible to feel emotionally close to everyone we meet, it definitely is possible to act in their best interest. We can always treat them as we would want to be treated if we were in their situation. Happily, feelings often do arise in the wake of our actions, but it is the action not the feeling that is most important. This simple but profound guideline will show us our duty in nearly every case.

We have briefly looked at how the Great Commandment guides us in following Jesus. It remains to look at two specific commands Jesus gives elsewhere about loving our neighbor. The first deals with loving neighbors who are our enemies. No doubt many people wish Jesus had not spoken on this topic. Loving friends or even strangers is not nearly so difficult as loving our enemies. But Jesus said,

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:43–48).

We see ourselves as loving people because we love family and friends. But Jesus says that is not enough. Citing the love that God bears even for his enemies, Jesus calls us to resist the fleshly temptation to hate our enemies; instead he asks us to imitate our heavenly Father by loving them. This is an act of the will, not of the feelings. And it is not easy. But as we act in the obedience of faith to please our Father, his Spirit will work in us and change our attitude toward our

enemies. Such love glorifies God. Becoming perfect in love means growing into a mature love for others, which is a lifelong journey, but one on which we can make remarkable progress.

Jesus also gives his disciples a new standard for loving one another. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35). This lifts love to its highest degree. We are to show the same self-sacrificing love toward fellow believers as Jesus has shown toward us. So important is this that a few verses later he reiterates it and elaborates, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12–13). Jesus is about to lay down his life for them and tells them that they are to lay down their lives for their brothers and sisters in the family of God. Over the centuries, there have been times when this was fulfilled literally. More often, however, it has been fulfilled in meeting the needs of fellow believers for food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. John, for example, says, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:16–18). This kind of love, says Jesus, demonstrates to the world that we are truly his disciples (Jn. 13:34–34). And the unity that such love produces witnesses to the world that God has sent Jesus to be the Savior of the world (Jn. 17:21).

If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that there is all too little of this kind of love among believers today. Instead, there is an abundance of criticism, contention, and division along with an unconscionable neglect of the poor. And we wonder why nonbelievers call us hypocrites and refuse to believe.

When we look carefully at the teachings and example of Jesus Christ, the call to “follow me” takes on much greater clarity and specificity. It is indeed a call to “walk as Jesus walked,” to live a life of radical faith and love. Once we truly grasp this, our first reaction is likely to be one of dismay. If we are at all aware of the depth of indwelling sin and the dysfunctions that plague our lives, we know it is impossible for us to fulfill such a call. Yet this reaction is actually healthy, because it is based in reality. It is indeed impossible for us to live this way. And that is precisely the point. Jesus knows we cannot follow him without a power

beyond ourselves. And that is why he sent the Holy Spirit to empower us.

It is only through the indwelling Holy Spirit that we can obey the teaching of Jesus and follow his example. He assures us of the Father's love, he makes the things of Christ real to us; he makes the gospel precious to us; he convicts us of sin and assures of forgiveness when we repent; he transforms us from glory to glory, into the likeness of Jesus (2 Cor. 3:16–18). That is why we are taught to earnestly seek to be filled with the Spirit each day (Eph. 5:18) and to be led by him in all our ways (Gal. 5:16–25). When we do, we will find that we can live in newness of life. Not perfectly and not immediately. But day by day, as we walk in faith and obedience, the Spirit will produce in us the character of Jesus: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23).

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