

What it Means to Follow Jesus

Episode 7 - Group Leader Podcast

Introduction

Hey everyone and welcome to episode 7 of the Group Leader Podcast.

Would you do me a favor? Would you reply to the email you got this podcast in and just let me know what your group has been up to this summer? Like are you still meeting, have you been on a break, just doing social events? And in case you're wondering, any of those things is fine.

I'm just curious to know what everyone's doing so I can get a sense of the rhythm of our groups.

Alright, let's jump into our topic - what it means to follow Jesus.

What "following Jesus" really means

In the church, we talk a lot about "following Jesus," or being a "Christ-follower." And I fear that this is one of those terms we can hear so much that we become numb to what it actually means, or we assume we know what it means when we haven't really thought much about it at all.

These terms - "following Jesus" and "Christ-follower" - are more modern ways of saying we are "disciples" of Jesus. That word, "disciple," is crucial for understanding what it means to follow Jesus.

In Greek, the language the New Testament was written in, the word we translate as "disciple" is *mathētēs*. That term simply means "learner." But it doesn't mean that in the sense you might think.

One of the problems with interpreting things in the Bible is that we're tempted to read it without recognizing our cultural blinders. We can often read something and not realize that we're reading it through our cultural lens, and we can miss the intended meaning of what was said originally. This is one one of those instances.

To us today, to say that someone is a "learner" means that they're a student, right? It means they take instruction, internalize information, and regurgitate it for a test or for someone else.

But that's not what the Bible means when it uses the word "learner," or disciple. When the Bible speaks of learning or of being a disciple, it's referring to something closer to what we might think of as equipping, training, or apprenticing.

In Jesus' day, being a disciple of a rabbi was the pinnacle of achievement in their social circles. It's what every young boy growing up would want to be. So from a young age they would start to memorize the entire Torah, or what we think of as the Old Testament, in hopes that they would one day be qualified to become a disciple. If they actually made it all the way through the process and were picked to be discipled by one of the rabbis, they would start following them around everywhere they went.

If you were a disciple of a rabbi, the goal was to spend as much time with them as possible in order to learn as much of their teaching as possible so that you could become as much like the rabbi as possible.

Their culture wasn't individualistic like ours. They didn't want to become their own version of their rabbi - they wanted to become just like their rabbi.

And to do that, they had to walk where they walked, do what they did, and teach like they taught.

They were being equipped to be a rabbi on their own one day. They were in training as an apprentice.

That's much different than classroom learning as we think of it today. And it means when Jesus called someone to be his disciple he was calling them in that context, with that cultural understanding. Which means following Jesus might mean something different than what we think.

Following Jesus does not mean sitting in a classroom and memorizing information. Following Jesus means walking where he walks, doing what he did, and teaching what he taught.

Disciples of Jesus are not supposed to simply learn information, they are supposed to apply information into their lives in a way that leads to transformation.

So, what does it really mean to follow Jesus, to be his disciple?

A disciple is one who responds in faith and obedience to the gracious call to follow Jesus Christ. Following Jesus is a lifelong process of dying to self while allowing Jesus Christ to come alive in us.¹

Let me say that again.

¹ Definition from Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials*, p. 24

A disciple is one who responds in faith and obedience to the gracious call to follow Jesus Christ. Following Jesus is a lifelong process of dying to self while allowing Jesus to come alive in us.

There's a lot in that statement, so let me break down some of the more important parts of it, starting with the disciple "responding in faith and obedience."

A disciple responds in faith and obedience

It's common to hear someone in the church refer to the time they "put their faith in Christ" or "made a decision for Christ." And for good reason - that's part of the way we respond to Jesus' call to follow him, by putting our faith in him and trusting him to lead our lives.

Hebrews 11:1 defines faith this way: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Responding in faith to Christ, then, means we are assured, we are confident, in his promises of salvation, restoration, and eternal life. We have the conviction that those things will happen despite our lack of visual evidence.

Responding in faith isn't a one-time thing, either. Living by faith is an everyday action for the Christ-follower whose beliefs and convictions are constantly being challenged by other people or life circumstances.

But responding to Christ's call to follow him is not merely about faith - it's also about obedience. By obedience I simply mean doing what Jesus tells us to do.

We follow Jesus with our heart and our minds, yes, but we also follow him with our hands and our feet. Remember, the call to discipleship, or following Jesus, is not just a call to belief - it's a call to change your life and actions based on those beliefs as well.

Just as a disciple following their rabbi would become more and more like him the more they followed him, so we want to become more and more like Jesus in our thought and our actions the more we follow him.

Now, we are not saved through our actions, but our actions are evidence that we have been saved.

This is what James is talking about when he writes, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22 NIV). And it's what Jesus means when he explains, "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14 ESV).

If we have truly put our faith in Christ, then our inward transformation will have outward results.

But without faith, we have no foundation for following Jesus in the first place. The two go hand in hand.

Following Jesus means we respond in faith and obedience, but that response is to the gracious call to follow Jesus Christ, which is the second phrase we need to understand.

The gracious call to follow Jesus

When we use the language of “making a decision for Christ” we can get a little carried away and think it was because of our own effort or decision that we responded to Jesus’ call. That doesn’t mean we don’t have a role to play - we do - but it may not be as significant as we think.

Think about it this way. When someone goes out and buys you a gift and brings it to your house to give you, you have a choice in that moment of whether or not you will accept that gift. Now, we have cultural norms that put pressure on us to accept the gift no matter what, but it really is up to you whether you accept it. But let’s say you do accept the gift, and now it’s yours.

Question: Who gets credit for you having the gift? You could say it’s now yours because you accepted it when you didn’t have to, and that’s certainly true.

But it’s also true that you wouldn’t have been able to accept the gift without it being offered in the first place. If there was no gift-giver, there would be nothing to accept.

This is how salvation works. We accept a gift that we graciously given to us by God through Jesus’ sacrificial death and resurrection.

The best explanation of this in my mind is from Ephesians 2:10. The first few verses focus on what it was like when each one of us was separated from Christ by sin, but then there’s a turning point in verse four where we see the gracious gift of salvation in Christ being offered.

Let me read it to you.

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ

Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

But God... Those two words contain the heart of the gospel, that God loves his children so much that He sent His Son to die for them. Now, all those who respond in faith to that Son get to enjoy the righteousness of that Son.

Following Jesus means we respond in faith and obedience to his gracious call to follow him.

While we grasp the basics of those concepts, the reality is that responding in faith and obeying Jesus is a lifelong process, which is our third phrase we're looking at.

Following Jesus is a lifelong process

Even though our salvation is immediate upon responding in faith to Jesus' sacrifice, it takes a lifetime to conform our lives to his example. Following Jesus is what has been referred to as "a long obedience in the same direction."

Following Jesus is a decision to enter into a pattern of recreating our lives to look more like his. There's a reason almost every metaphor for spiritual growth in the Bible is a gardening one - because it takes time, and much of it is out of our control.

And just like with gardening we will experience seasons of growth, seasons of drought, and times of harvest. There will be times to celebrate and times to grieve.

If you're feeling exhausted or disappointed with your spiritual growth, then take heart. You're in the same boat as everyone else. We're all in the process of killing off sin patterns while cultivating new life-giving ones. That's not going to happen overnight.

That can make us really frustrated when we're used to Amazon bringing whatever we want to our doorstep within two days. We're programmed to want immediate satisfaction today, but that's simply not how spiritual growth works. We all want a microwaveable faith, but the one we've been given is a crockpot faith. Low and slow is the key - it's how you get that unmistakable flavor of someone that has simmered in Christ.

But what we're after is a life that's more and more obedient to Jesus each and every day - even if we have trouble seeing the change each day.

And the good news is we're promised that God will see it through. This is what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it

to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6 ESV). Even though we’re guaranteed to screw things up along the way, God will see through the work He started in us when He saved us.

That process unfolds over a lifelong process, but what does that process consist of? That’s the last phrase we need to break down, and to do so we need to look at it alongside what we just talked through.

Following Jesus is a lifelong process of dying to self while allowing Jesus to come alive in us.

Dying to self while allowing Jesus to come alive in us

The lifelong process of following Jesus involves two competing forces - dying to self while allowing Jesus to live in us.

We need to talk about each of those separately before we see how they work together in the process, though, so let’s start with dying to self.

Dying to self

The concept of denying self comes directly from the teachings of Jesus, most notably his call to discipleship in Luke 9:23-24 where he says this:

“If anyone would come after me, let him **deny himself** and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

For a long time I struggled with understanding what Jesus meant by “deny himself.” What I’ve come to see is that to deny myself means to reject myself or to refuse to give into myself. In effect, it’s like saying saying, “I don’t know myself.”

That sounds weird until you realize that all our sin is borne out of our desire to be our own god. That’s the lie Adam and Eve believed in the garden - that they could be their own gods and determine the rules for themselves. Each of my sins is rooted somehow in that same insidious lie. Each time I give into the idea that I can be my own lord, I deny the Lordship of Christ and set myself in rebellion against God.

So what does it mean to deny yourself?

“To deny yourself means to deny your self-lordship. It means saying no to the god who is me, the reject the demands of the god who is me, to refuse to obey the claims of the god who is me.

[It means we say] a decisive no - 'I do not know the lord Me - I do not bow down to him anymore.' Jesus calls us to say no to ourselves so we can say yes to him."²

Saying no to ourselves so we can say to Jesus brings us to the second force at work in our lifelong process of following Jesus - allowing him to come alive in us.

Allowing Jesus to come alive in us

As we deny ourselves and crucify, or kill, or own desires, we make more and more room for Jesus to take up residence in our hearts and minds. And I use those violent words - crucify and kill - on purpose, because following Jesus isn't always easy.

Jesus promises to give his followers abundant life (see John 10:10), but he makes it clear over and over again that following him is costly and difficult. That's not the narrative many of us are telling ourselves.

We often want the abundance Jesus offers without accepting the cost and making the sacrifices. We want the resurrection without the crucifixion. But that's not how it works.

Darrell Johnson, a professor of pastoral theology says about this,

"Just as there would be no resurrection for Jesus without crucifixion, so there would be no resurrection for the disciples without crucifixion...A man on his way to public crucifixion 'was compelled to abandon all earthly hopes and ambitions.' Jesus calls his followers to think of ourselves as already dead, to bury our earthly hopes and dreams, to bury the plans and agendas we made for ourselves. He will either resurrect our dreams or replace them with dreams and plans of his own...This is a hard but liberating saying...Freedom comes when we lay down the ill-gotten false crown, when we say no, when we live as though the gods who are us have already died."³

Here's our definition of a disciple and what it means to follow Jesus one more time:

A disciple is one who responds in faith and obedience to the gracious call to follow Jesus Christ. Following Jesus is a lifelong process of dying to self while allowing Jesus Christ to come alive in us.

Conclusion

Most people think life is supposed to be easy. That life should involve as little pain as possible. And sometimes they come to Jesus thinking he'll make that happen.

² Darrell Johnson, "Demands My All," article in Greg Ogden's *Discipleship Essentials*, p. 28

³ Darrell Johnson, "Demands My All," article in Greg Ogden's *Discipleship Essentials*, p. 29

But that's not what he promises.

If anything, he promises the opposite. 2 Timothy 3:12 says, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Not "might be." Not "those who follow me in certain countries." But everyone who follows him.

If that sounds hard to you, I want you to think about this. Remember those verses from Ephesians 2 you heard a few minutes ago? We have a God who overlooked our open rebellion against Him and our allegiance to Satan himself, and sent His Son to die in our place so we could spend eternity with Him.

Following Jesus means we've counted the cost, we understand the difficulty, and we keep following anyways. Not because we're promised a good life or an easy life, but because we're promised Jesus - and he's enough.

Following Jesus means giving up the things we want for the thing we want even more - Jesus.

Take care.