

What It Means To Follow Jesus

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[0:00] All right, thank you very much, Elliot. Like he said, my name is Jesse. For those of you who are new and don't know me, glad that you're here with us, honestly. So glad that you are with us today. Those of you who are listening online can't be here today.

We know some of you just can't because of sickness and various things. Love you, miss you, glad you're listening. And if you have a Bible, go ahead and turn to Matthew, in Matthew chapter four, verse 18, and put your finger there and then also have a spot in John chapter 21, verse 20.

If you don't have a Bible, no worries. We're also gonna have these up on the screen. And so what we're doing, before we kind of jump into the sermon, we're kicking off this year with a series that really is just embracing what this time of year is all about, right?

New Year's resolutions, it's new beginnings. We think of like, hey, looking back over the last year, what can we do to maybe capitalize or improve upon the last year?

Or some of us are just like, man, we really need a huge change from last year altogether. And so we make these resolutions. Not all resolutions are bad. So some can be really good, right?

[1:09] Some of us think like, you know what I wanna do? I wanna spend more meaningful time with family and friends this year. I wanna up that game. That's a great resolution to have, right? Some of us are like, you know what? I'm gonna get more fit.

That's what I'm gonna do. Good resolution, right? It's stewarding your body well. And here's the thing. The hope for all of us in any resolution that we make is that we wanna achieve that, right? And our hope in achieving that resolution is somehow it will bring us into a happiness that we feel devoid or deficient in in this moment.

And we hope by achieving it and achieving that happiness, our life is going to be better. But my question for us, is that really true? Just because we think that's gonna happen, does it really happen?

And a little argument against that is a lady in her New York Times bestselling book, *The Myth of Happiness*, a psychologist, Sonia Liabar-Misky, real name.

[2:04] She warns us of this. Nearly all of us buy into what I call the myths of happiness, beliefs that certain adult achievements, marriage, kids, jobs, wealth, will make us forever happy.

And that certain adult failures or adversities, health problems, not having a life partner, having little money, will make us forever unhappy. This reductive understanding of happiness is culturally reinforced and continues to endure despite overwhelming evidence that our well-being does not operate according to such black and white principles.

One such myth of happiness is the notion that I'll be happy when blank happens. Fill it in. Whatever you're thinking for this year. The false promise is not that achieving those dreams won't make us happy.

They almost certainly will. The problem is that these achievements, even when initially perfectly satisfying, will not make us as intensely happy or for as long as we believe they will.

This lady's not even a Christian. And she gets it. She is a psychologist who has studied and studied and studied people. And she knows.

[3:22] And here's the thing. Achieving new goals, buying new things, this is what she's saying. They will only make you happy for a moment. That happiness isn't going to last. And so we have to, what we do, is we just keep moving on to the next thing.

I got this car. I bought this house. I got into this new relationship. It's exciting for a while. Then we start to get bored with it. What's next, right? You can see this in your kids, right?

They're already bored with a toy you just gave them two weeks ago for Christmas. Let's move on. So for me, I started running last year. My goal was to get to be able to run a 5K, right?

And I thought, man, if I could do that, that would be the ultimate achievement. Because for all of my life, I hated running and did not understand why anybody would run that long for that far. And so I achieved it, right?

I hit a 5K. And for the first few times I did that, it was thrilling. I was like, wow. And I was really impressed with myself. But after a while of doing that, you're kind of like, okay, big deal.

[4:21] What's next, right? So it's a 10K. Then it's a half marathon. Where does it stop? You know, I'm going to be running with Forrest Gump all the way across the country or something, right? Now, let's make this a little more pertinent to why you and I are here today.

Because you're not here to get a lecture from me on how to set better New Year's resolutions. Because I'd probably just tell everyone to go run and stop whining and that wouldn't be helpful. You're here because you want change. You're here because life as it is, is okay. But you know it can be better. And you want to see that improvement. So here's what I want you to know before I say anything else.

Christianity isn't primarily concerned with changing the circumstances surrounding you. It's not concerned about the things that you have and you don't have, what you're wearing and what you own.

It's not primarily even concerned about helping you stop bad behavior. It's about changing you from the inside first. It goes after your heart. That's always where it stands.

[5:26] And everything that we're gonna get into today, I wanna preface this. Because I don't want you to walk away with, man, I gotta do better, try harder. Everything we're talking about today with Christianity and change, this comes by a powerful work of God.

And that's why we champion grace. Grace comes to you because of what God does. He initiates this thing, okay? And what you do is you receive it and you surrender to it and the rest takes care of itself as you walk it out in obedience.

And, you know, when we think about like, okay, Christianity is offering me this change, but it goes after my heart. It goes against kind of the modern day ethic of follow your heart and you'll be happy, right?

That's what we kind of grow up in. We're steeped in a culture that says that's what you should do. Follow your heart and you will find your happiness, your best life. But let's be honest, we've all done that, right?

We all do that. And typically it blows up in our face, right? Following your heart rarely works out well. Christianity says don't follow your heart. What it says to us is follow Jesus.

[6:40] Now, cool, that sounds cool, right? Follow Jesus. He seems like a great guy, doesn't sound so bad. Until you see the implications of how long and rigorous that following can be.

Case in point, we are going to look at one of Jesus's disciples, the apostle Peter, okay? Before he meets Jesus, he's a fisherman and he's working as a fisherman and then suddenly Jesus steps into his life.

Matthew 4, 18. While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he, Jesus, saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea for they were fishermen.

And he said to them, follow me and I will make you fishers of men. Immediately they left their nets and followed him. So Peter goes and he follows Jesus, right?

He's with them for the next three years while Jesus is doing ministry. He sees a lot of amazing things, including Jesus's death and resurrection, right? A lot of great stuff.

[7:36] He gets taught by Jesus, like all this like brilliant wisdom, the truths of heaven and what salvation is all about. And you would think by now, Jesus is about to ascend into heaven, go away, and you think, man, old Pete's got it.

He has arrived, right? If he was, he's like black belt status, ready to go. But look at what Jesus says to him right before he ascends to heaven.

John 21, verses 20 and 22. Now Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had also leaned back against him during the supper and said, Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?

And when Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, Lord, what about this man? What about this man? Now Peter's asking that question because Jesus just told Peter, hey, you know what?

As you follow me and you get older, you're gonna go to places you don't wanna go, but you're gonna go anyways. And it was depicting the kind of death that Peter was gonna die.

[8:36] He was gonna be martyred for Jesus. So Peter's like, okay, well, what about this other guy? Jesus said to him, if it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?

Peter, you follow me. Don't worry about him. You follow me. Jesus' first and last words to Peter on this earth, follow me, follow me.

Isn't that an amazing thing? And he says to Peter in this moment, Peter, don't worry about what that looks like for everyone else. Don't compare what I am called, the path I'm calling them to walk compared to yours.

Simply follow me. Go where I lead you regardless of what that means. Now that doesn't sound very comforting. And guess what? It wasn't very comforting for Peter, which is why he said what we said. Well, what about this guy? But that's the point. Being a good follower isn't exactly appealing. Now if we did a series on leading, right, we would probably get a lot more interest.

[9:38] Following, not as popular as leading. We like to have followers. If you think about like social media, it's like, man, how many followers can I get? That's the main thing. But we don't like the idea of being a follower.

Parents, we often tell our kids, don't be a follower, be a leader. However, it's not necessarily bad to be a follower, especially if you're following a great leader.

And Christianity doesn't start with Jesus trying to make you a better leader. It starts with you realizing that he's God and you need to surrender to him, follow him.

See, we can't lead ourselves where we need to go. We can lead ourselves where we think we want to go, which typically ends up bad, but we can't lead ourselves where we need to go.

Only Jesus can do that, which means that the beginning of Christianity starts with this acceptance of going along the journey of following Jesus wherever he goes and doing whatever he says.

[10:36] And that's the way it starts. And that's the way it ends, just like in Peter's life. And this explains why Christianity was first called the way. In Acts chapter nine, verses one and two, this is like the beginning of the church, you know, like Jesus had ascended to heaven and all the disciples like get together, the spirit fills them, they get launched out on this amazing mission that the church has just started.

I mean, we're like maybe a couple years in here. It says, but Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, another city in Israel, so that if he found any belonging to the way, they didn't even call them Christians back then.

It was like people that belonged to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem, right? That's how people knew them. They were people of the way, which is pretty cool, right? It's like maybe we can just ditch the Christian thing and just call it, hey, we're people of the way now.

It sounds like really mysterious and out there, but think about it. It's crazy to think about that a Christian in a city like Damascus could be identified just like a Christian in Jerusalem, right?

That Christian way over there, right? And that Christian way over there in this other city, they could be identified as followers of the way. Why? It's not because they dress the same.

[12:02] It's not because they started having this like specific accent that they put on. They didn't start speaking in the King James English and then people were like, well, I know what that's about. That dude, that gal's a Christian over there.

They didn't wear a sign or a shirt that had like the fish symbol on it. None of that was happening. People knew it by the way they lived, right? They could tell who they belonged to, who they were disciples of, who they followed.

And Christians are followers of the way of Jesus. It's not a way, it's the way. We don't get to pick our own version of following Jesus. I remember in my late teens, me and my buddies had grown up in church and we were trying to like, you know, have the best of both worlds, you know, just like, yeah, we believe in Jesus, but we kind of want to do our own thing over here, have fun, and we call it live to balance.

He goes, we just want to be balanced, man. We just want to be balanced, which is really our way of saying, we don't want to really follow Jesus. We kind of want to acknowledge he exists and he's there and all that, but we want to go wild and do our own stuff over here as well.

But there's no such thing as these various versions of a way to follow Jesus. And another thing, it's not like the way of Jesus was different back then to what it is now.

[13:20] Like it hasn't evolved. It hasn't gotten more sophisticated or adapted to fit with the times. The way of Jesus has been an unchanging pathway that his disciples have followed for the last 2,000 years.

Matthew 7, 13 to 14 says, enter by the narrow gate. Jesus is talking about what it looks like to follow him. Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction. And those who enter by it are many, for the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life. Yay! And those who find it are few.

These verses, they're giving us, Jesus is giving us some idea of what the way is like, what it looks like to follow him. It's a narrow way, right? The banks are tight.

It's difficult. But it's not all bad news because it says, you know what, this way, in the end, it leads to life. You know, during Bomb Cyclone Elliot, which Elliot really, it's the bane of all names for him.

[14:25] He's like, why did they have to name the coldest storm in our winter after me? But that's what it is. You can pray for him. But during Bomb Cyclone Elliot, when it was very, very bitterly cold, we thought as a family, you know what we should do?

Is we should go to the mountains where it's even colder and take a vacation. And so that's what we did. And we got this cabin that we rented and this cabin was on this private road and we were going on this private road which was very narrow.

And it was very hard and it was very steep and it was very covered in snow. And so after a harrowing attempt of driving a vehicle up the steep, snowy, icy driveway, I was told in no uncertain terms that I was never allowed to do that again.

So we parked our car in a safe place and we hiked our luggage and food in and out of the cabin. During our stay, that is what we did.

Unfortunately, there was no other way to get to the cabin. And it was difficult in the moment when we had to haul the luggage but it was worth it. The beautiful views, the just being out in that spot in nature and seeing amazing sunrises in the morning, it was worth it.

[15:43] And it's the same with Jesus. There is no other way to Jesus except the one he has prepared. So why does Jesus say his way is costly and narrow? Well, for one, being a follower of Jesus means we have to follow him exclusively.

Yes, it is true. Jesus is bad at sharing. He is not saying, you can follow me and then whoever else you want. He's like, no, no. You follow me and nobody else.

All joking aside, the gospels depict Jesus' earthly ministry as a rabbi. They often called him rabbi. Even his own disciples did. And rabbi was this Hebrew word for teacher.

And in those days, a rabbi, a teacher, he had disciples. And these disciples were dedicated to this one person. They were students of this one rabbi.

They weren't with this rabbi on Monday, this rabbi on Tuesday, this rabbi on Friday, and then let's like circle around and talk about the different teachings and see which one was the best. No, they were dedicated to one guy.

[16:47] Back then, following a rabbi, following a teacher, being a disciple wasn't like picking just your random podcasters that you like. It's not, it wasn't like just kind of following your favorite social media influencers.

You didn't just add a rabbi to a list of people that you were really into. You gave up your life to follow that person. You attached yourself to them. You wanted more than anything else to be like them. That's why you did it. You became a rigorous student that was devoted to their teaching, that was devoted to not only knowing their teaching but seeing how they lived because you would pattern your life after that.

And you did that no matter the cost. And that's what Jesus' disciples did. Matthew 4 verse 20. It said, immediately, right? He says, Peter, Andrew, John, and James, sons of Zebedee, follow me. And what did they do? They immediately left their nets and followed him. Right? That's what they did. And even for the next guys, James and John, down in verse 22, right? Jesus calls those guys and they left their nets and he says, follow me.

[17:54] And immediately, so they left their boat and their father and followed him. We see the calling of Matthew in Luke 5 in verse 27. Jesus sees him sitting at the tax booth and he says to him, follow me.

And what does Matthew do? Well, the next verse, and leaving everything, leaving everything, he rose and followed him. these guys didn't just leave a few little things behind.

They left behind jobs, their wealth, the way they were making wealth and income. Some of them even left behind their families to follow Jesus.

They had to say goodbye to those things. They had to let go of those things. But that is the nature of following Jesus exclusively. Being a follower of Jesus means no longer following other things. And it's more than, following Jesus is more than just not adding Jesus to the list of people you follow. To follow Jesus means you have to unfollow quite a bit of other things.

[19:03] And this includes your own selfish desire. Pretty famous verse that Jesus talks about, Matthew 16, 24. He tells his disciples, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself.

And take up his cross and follow me. Man, what does that mean, right? What does that mean practically, Jesus? What does it mean for me to deny myself?

What does it mean to like take up my cross and follow? Does it mean, what do I have to cut out? Does it mean I only get to watch The Chosen on TV now? Is that what we're looking at here? Or is it, I'm only allowed to listen to like Hillsong, maybe Switchfoot, if I'm really stretching it, get into some U2.

Is that like where the boundaries are? Jesus isn't saying everything in the world is evil. So you better create a bubble for yourself to live in so nothing can get in there and ruin you.

We still have to live in the world. We just can't, he calls us, you can't live by the world's standards anymore. You can't live by their values. You can't live by their measure of what success is.

[20:08] You can't live by what they're telling you is gonna bring you happiness and purpose and meaning. You gotta live by what? You gotta live by new values, new kingdom values. You gotta follow me and in all things the priority in your life has to be me, Jesus, and my kingdom.

You have to put those things first, right? He tells us that. Seek first my kingdom. Seek first the kingdom of God. Seek first his righteousness. So what does that mean practically?

Let's flesh this out in a few different ways. What does it mean that we can live in the world but we have to prioritize Jesus above everything else? If your political party does or says anything contradictory to Jesus and what his kingdom stands for, you stand with Jesus and you stand against your political party.

That's what that means. If your friends are behaving in a way, young people, if your friends are behaving in a way that contradicts Jesus and his kingdom values, it means you don't go along. For starters. And you should, in love for them and in honor of your Savior, stand for Jesus and call out their sin. Saying, actually, what you guys are doing is wrong.

[21:21] We shouldn't be doing that. Here's another denying yourself that probably hits closer to home for everybody in this room. Our days are so full of work and TikTok and Netflix and video games and watching sports and going to sports and playing sports or fitness or dance or chasing after little toddlers or knitting sweaters, whatever it is.

Right? There is a myriad of ways we can go with this. We got nothing left in the tank and nothing left of our time to spend any time with Jesus in prayer or in the scripture.

In our modern moment, denying ourselves looks most like prioritizing time with God by cutting back on our screen consumption.

If you think about it, how much time we spend looking at some type of screen. It's a lot. If you think how reliant, connected, addicted we are to our media today, man, we are just saturated in what's coming at us from our screens.

To deny ourselves, man, to start cutting back on some of that, man, that's gonna be hard because we are addicted. Make no mistake about it, we are addicted and when you try to cut away anything that you're addicted to, it is difficult and that's why being a follower of Jesus requires discipline.

[22:52] You know, we often disassociate discipline from being a disciple and yet they are part of the same word family, so closely related. So, just think about this, right?

To improve or grow at anything requires discipline. You have to discipline yourself, right? Shelly, up here, she had to study, she went through studying for, is it RN?

nurse practitioner thing. I mean, she was doing, she had to discipline herself. She had to say, set boundaries saying, okay, I have to spend some time every week, this amount of time studying and getting, growing in knowledge, understanding.

She had to go to, to practice it. She had to do those kind of things. She had to discipline herself to be able to grow, to become a nurse practitioner. And that's, that's what it takes.

My own two sons, they're, they're learning instruments. They're, they're learning to play the guitar and the drums. You know, at first it sounded really rough. If you're familiar with the movie, it was like Bill and Ted's Wild Stallions.

[23:57] It was not good, but they've, they've been disciplined, practicing every day. And they've improved a bunch. They sound, I can actually tell which Led Zeppelin song they're playing upstairs now.

It's pretty phenomenal. But to grow as musicians, they, they had to follow well-worn path of centuries of guitar players and drummers before them.

Right? So they had to look and see like, oh, this is how you, you do your, you know, your fingers for the C chord and the D chord and the F sharp and the whatever it is.

They had to learn, they had to drill on scales and get used to that. They, the point is, is they didn't have to go and, oh, I want to play guitar. Well, I guess I got to figure out on this own. I want to play drums. I guess I got to go figure out on this own. Let me just, let me just try don't, don't, don't.

Well, that sounded good. Let me, no, they, praise the Lord for YouTube. Right? Because I am too cheap to buy them lessons. But they were able to go on and they were able to be taught by people that knew this and went before them and could pass it on.

[24:57] And that, that is the same way with following Jesus. And this is where you chuck out the YouTube part of that. All right? There are timeless, well-worn paths that have been passed down over the centuries.

You don't have to invent or discover some secret discipleship pathway. Christians have been doing these disciplines of following Jesus for centuries.

centuries. And, and remember the goal of these disciplines is one thing. It's not to make your head, give you a head full of knowledge. It's to bring you to a person. It's to bring you to Jesus.

That's what this is all about. And the more time you and I spend with Jesus, the more you become like him. Check out 2 Corinthians 3, verse 18. Paul gives us this beautiful, beautiful, glorious hope. And I, we're gonna just like, I, I'm just praying, Lord, man, help this like land in us. Land in us. If, if you remember anything, I hope this is the verse you go to every single day this week and look at it again and again and again.

[26:01] And this is our hope. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. Paul, in this verse, is talking about being transformed into the image of Jesus but also what it takes.

What comes before him saying we are being transformed into the same image of Jesus from one degree of glory? What do we have to do? we have to behold.

behold. Okay? That's our part. And that word behold means to look intently at. What are we looking intently at?

We're looking intently at the glory of the Lord with unveiled face. There is nothing between us and him. We can look intently and fully in him. Nothing's blocking his glory.

[27:05] This isn't taking a quick sneak peek during your life. This verse says beholding. It's a verb tense that implies just ongoing. You're not doing it once.

You're doing it again and again and again and again and again. So where are we doing all this beholding? Where is this beholding happening? And that's what we're going to get into over the next few weeks.

We're not going to get into it now but that happens in solitude by yourself in a quiet solitary place where we put down the phones and the screens and we disconnect and we could focus on beholding God.

It happens when we gather together here as the local church where we come together and we're coming together to do many things but the main thing is we're coming together to behold the glory of our Savior, the glory of our Father.

And then there's the glory of what we get to do between services and outside of the times of solitude and that's one anothering with friends that's why we do community groups.

[28:11] We gather and the purpose of our gathering is to come together and those little meetings is beholding the glory of God or could be around the dinner table as a family or even outside of community groups just time together with friends, one anothering beholding the glory of God.

See it's not enough just to go to church. There are plenty of people that have gone to church a long time that aren't more like Jesus. Jesus. Why? I'm glad there wasn't a massive amen but you know a little amen would have been okay.

But why? How can people just go to church for years on end and never look more like Jesus because man that's the only time they're allowing themselves to behold. world. And what we take in with our eyes and ears most is going to form who we are. Whether or not you realize it you are already being formed by shows, by news, by music, by social media, by all these things.

Let's call them the unspiritual disciplines that we faithfully practice throughout our lives. They are forming us. They are shaping us. They are molding us but into what?

[29 : 26] A more angry lustful person? Quite possibly. If you spend 20 or more hours a week and that's a conservative estimate of what we talk about, how much time we spend on our screens, and 30 minutes or so every couple of weeks with Jesus, it doesn't take a rocket science to figure out what is going to be the results.

The old saying insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. And you and I aren't going to change until we change our formative disciplines.

We need to cut back on what I can call the unspiritual disciplines. And we need to grow in and spend more time in these good spiritual formative disciplines, these old pathways, these well-worn pathways that are being offered to us.

another year of the same thing, of doing the same thing, isn't going to result in anything different. We will only be further away from where we need to be.

And here's what I want to encourage us with today. I want to encourage each of us today to consider what you're going to give up this year so you will have time to focus on following Jesus. And Jesus would tell his would-be disciples to count the cost before they followed him.

[30 : 47] Right? He did that. He said, man, before you can just come and follow me, you really need to count the cost. What's it going to cost you? What are you willing to pay?

And what's the plan? Now, I know that's harder than you may have thought it was going to be. We started out with follow Jesus. Yes, we can do this. Now you're like, whoo, this sounds just easy.

Bad sales pitch, buddy. Don't know if we can pull this off. But here's what I want to leave you with this encouragement. It sounds hard, but you know what? It's worth it. It is so worth it.

It's worth following Jesus because there's no other way to life. That's it. And again, I started out with like, man, don't leave here thinking, man, I got a bunch of stuff to do.

Christianity is not about following all the rules. John 14, 6, Jesus said to him, he says to a guy, I am the way and the truth and the life.

[31 : 52] No one comes to the Father except through me. Jesus says, he is the way. He is the truth.

He is the life. Everything that we have been talking about is so much more than rules to live by. It's about a person to dwell in.

That's what we're holding out to you when we talk about following Jesus, about thinking about looking into these things, of adding these disciplines to your life. It's about learning to abide in not just any person, but life itself.

The well-worn paths of these disciplines bring us into communion with our Savior. They reinvigorate the life and joy of peace of which he alone is the fountainhead.

And finally, what they do is they build our lives on the unshakable rock, which is our Savior. And that's another reason why it's worth following Jesus, because he causes our lives to be unshakable.

[32 : 54] Why do we run out and have insurance and buy insurance and then buy insurance on our insurance? What are we trying to do? Right? We're trying to protect ourselves from things. We're trying to protect ourselves from storms, especially around here.

Luke 6, 46, Jesus says, Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like. He is like a man building a house who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock.

Jesus is the rock. And when a flood rose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it because it had been well built. Then Jesus says, But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built his house on the ground without a foundation.

