

HOW CAN I TRULY FOLLOW JESUS TODAY? (Part 1)**MARK 3:13-18**

Last week I began a new message series based on a statement Jesus made several times: “Follow Me.” We want to discern what Jesus’ call to discipleship looks like for you and me today. “Follow Me.” That was something Jesus said repeatedly to specific individuals he wanted to become His disciples. Probably the most well-known use of that word “disciple” refers to the twelve men we read about in the Bible who accompanied Jesus in his ministry and then became the primary leaders of the first Christians. But the word “disciple”, in the Bible, also referred to anyone and everyone who became a follower of Jesus not some group of elite or elevated Christians. In the Bible, a disciple is just synonymous with a believer or a Christian.

Disciples are involved in something called discipleship. What’s that? I shared this simple definition with you. “We might define discipleship as becoming a complete and competent follower of Jesus.” (George Barna) We asked the question, “Is every believer a disciple?” Biblically, you can’t divide the two and have some kind of two level Christianity. A believer in Jesus is a disciple of Jesus. If you’re not His disciple, you’re not really a believer in the biblical sense of that word. So, today, I’d like to ask and begin to answer with you what it means to follow Jesus in our day and time. How can you and I be Jesus’ disciples today? After all, those twelve men we refer to as the disciples actually, physically, and literally lived with Jesus. Was it important that they spend time with Jesus? Let’s read our first Bible passage just now. “He appointed twelve that they might be with him....” (Mk 3:14 NIV) Being with Jesus was absolutely essential and necessary to being His disciple. The relational piece was huge! If you learned how to play a musical instrument, you were in some sense a disciple of whoever taught you. And you learned from that person by being with that person. If you learned how to play a sport at a high level, you were a disciple of one or more coaches. You learned from those coaches by being with them. The relational piece was huge! If I am someone’s disciple, I have been with that person.

OK, so where does that leave you and me when it comes to being Jesus’ disciple? Nobody here today can go back in time to Palestine, put on a rough tunic and some scruffy sandals, find Jesus, and start following Him around. But you and I can indeed be Jesus’ disciples today even though we’re not physically with Jesus. It can and does happen at a spiritual level. Millions of Christians have been doing it for 2,000 years now. This Sunday and next I want to share with you eight marks or characteristics of a disciple of Jesus. On the one hand, they represent eight ways to be with Jesus in a spiritual sense. On the other hand, when they become an integral part of your life, they identify you as a disciple of Jesus. They’re ways that you can follow Jesus today. I’m not trying to be comprehensive or exhaustive with these eight marks. They might well be the eight most important marks of discipleship, but others might add some or take some away. Whatever...! I want to identify three or those marks today and then discuss the other five next week.

#1. LIVING IN AND UNDER THE BIBLE

That may seem like an odd way of putting it, but let me explain. First, a disciple of Jesus lives in the Bible. Jesus modeled the importance and use of the Bible with His disciples. He referred to the Old Testament often in his conversations with them. Someone has calculated that Jesus made 66 references to the Old Testament in his conversations with His disciples in the four Gospels and 90 other allusions to the Bible in speaking to others who weren't among the Twelve. Jesus had this relationship with the Bible that was both intimate and comprehensive. He obviously had memorized parts of it and was deeply familiar with all of it. Jesus modeled to those twelve men a life that was saturated and filled with God's Word.

That attitude towards the Bible got passed on from the twelve disciples to the first Christians. The first Christians were ethnic Jews, so they already believed the Old Testament was God's Word. They passed on that attitude toward those from non-Jewish, pagan backgrounds who became followers of Jesus. As the Gospels and the epistles were written, those first Christians recognized the voice of God in what we now call the New Testament. Paul wrote to his young friend, Timothy, "You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right." (2 Tim 3:15-16 NLT) When you read the book of Acts, nothing is ever said about the preaching skills of Paul or Peter, but God's Word was always received with joy and gladness. Why? Through it men, women, boys and girls found a restored relationship with Almighty God! "For you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God." (1 Peter 1:23 NLT) In the book of Acts, the people of one city called Berea were commended because of their attitude towards God's Word. "And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth." (Acts 17:11 NLT)

Just a few years ago, an important survey was conducted in over 1,000 American churches of approximately 250,000 individual church members or attendees concerning how Christians grow in their faith. Here was one incredibly important finding. "Nothing has a greater impact on spiritual growth than reflection on Scripture. If churches could do only one thing to help people at all levels of spiritual maturity grow in their relationship with Christ, their choice is clear. They would inspire, encourage, and equip people to read the Bible – specifically, to reflect on Scripture for meaning in their lives. The numbers say most churches are missing the mark – because only one out of five congregants reflects on Scripture every day." (REVEAL Survey 2011)

But this is more than just about reading the Bible like you would read a magazine or a novel. A disciple of Jesus also lives under the Bible in the sense that you recognize that because it is the voice of God it has authority over you. The Bible says, "Jesus said to the people who believed in him, 'You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" (John 8:31-32)

NLT) My friend, Jeff Lashley, reminded me this week of what is sometimes called the Nike verse in the Bible. You remember Nike's advertising slogan, don't you? Just do it! The Bible says, "But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves." (Jam 1:22 NLT) Isn't that what James is saying about God's Word? Don't just read it. Don't just listen to Pastor Rick and other people preach about it. Apply it. Live it out. Practice it. Just do it! Nobody's suggesting that you have to do Bible study every hour of every day. This is about knowing and then intentionally applying what God says about life.

At age 35, pastor and author Eugene Peterson, bought running shoes and began enjoying the smooth rhythms of long-distance running. Soon he was competing in 10K races every month or so, and then a marathon once a year. By then he was subscribing to and reading three running magazines! Then he pulled a muscle and couldn't run for a couple of months. Those magazines were still all over the house, but he never opened one. The moment he resumed running, though, he started reading again. That's when Peterson realized that his reading was an extension of something he was a part of. He was reading for companionship and affirmation of the experience of running. Sure, he learned a few things along the way, but mostly it was to deepen his experience of running. If he wasn't running, there was nothing to deepen. There's a parallel in there to reading and reflecting on Scripture. If I'm not living in active response to the living God, reading about His creation, His salvation, or His holiness won't hold my interest for long. The most important question about the Bible isn't "What does this mean," but "What can I obey?" Simple obedience – or living under the Bible - will open up our lives to a specific text or passage in the Bible more quickly than any number of Bible studies, dictionaries, and concordances.

Can there be any doubt that as a disciple of Jesus, you are going to find ways to live in, live out and live under this book? Can there be any doubt if you keep on finding ways to ignore the Bible, evade the Bible, dismiss the Bible, or refuse to recognize its authority over your life that you cannot be Jesus' disciple?

#2. INTIMATE AND PERSISTENT PRAYER

You might remember that Jesus' disciples came to Him one day and asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. They had obviously observed the richness and depth of Jesus' own prayer life and knew that their prayers were seriously wanting in comparison. Jesus provided what we now refer to as "The Lord's Prayer" and many of us can recite it from memory. In fact, I thought it would be helpful for us to pray that prayer together right now in the midst of that message. Let's do that just now. "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen." Jesus taught His disciples how to pray and what to pray about. He modeled and emphasized a life of prayer. He invited them and us to call God not just our Father, but "Daddy." In other words, Jesus invited them and us into a very intimate relationship with the God of the universe. Another of the most striking lessons that Jesus teaches about prayer is to be bold and persistent. He knew that your tendency and mine is to pray timid, "nampy-pampy" prayers and to ask God for something once and then just give up. God relishes bold, persistent prayers. Jesus said, "And so I tell you, keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." (Lk 11:9-10 NLT)

When you read about the first Christians - the first disciples of Jesus beyond those twelve men – in the book of Acts, you see prayer everywhere. Did you know that prayer is mentioned in Acts more than in any other book in the New Testament? The Church "Saul, also known as Paul, was filled with the Holy Spirit..." (Acts 13:9 NLT) "And the believers were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 13:52 NLT) itself was born out of a prayer meeting on the Day of Pentecost. Prayer was offered up continually in groups and by individuals. The Bible says, "All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer." (Acts 2:42 NLT) They prayed when they faced opposition and persecution. The Bible says, "But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him." (Acts 12:5 NLT) They prayed when they needed guidance and direction from God. For example, when they decided to replace Judas, the Bible says, "Then they all prayed, 'O Lord, you know every heart. Show us which of these men you have chosen as an apostle to replace Judas in this ministry....'" (Acts 1:24-25 NLT) They prayed when they ministered to those who were sick or hopeless. "As it happened, Publius's father was ill with fever and dysentery. Paul went in and prayed for him, and laying his hands on him, he healed him." (Acts 28:8 NLT) They prayed when they faced death. The Bible tells us that's what the first Christian martyr did. "As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' He fell to his knees, shouting, 'Lord, don't charge them with this sin!' And with that, he died." (Acts 7:59-60 NLT) If time allowed we could look at passages that reveal that these disciples prayed in the Jewish temple, in their homes which doubled as church buildings, on housetops,

by the riverside, by the seashore, on board ship, and in jail. They prayed at noon, in the afternoon, and even at midnight.

A man by the name of Peter spent a day of hard labor installing stone steps in his backyard. Each stone weighed between 100-200 pounds so it took all of Peter's strength and a few tools to maneuver them into place. His five year old daughter, Becky, begged to help her dad. When he suggested she just sing to encourage him, she said no. She wanted to help! So carefully, when it wouldn't endanger her, he let her place her hands on the rocks as he pushed them. Becky's "help" actually made Peter's job harder and it took longer. But at the end of the day, Peter not only had new steps but a daughter bursting with pride and a sense of accomplishment. "Me and Daddy made steps!" she proclaimed at dinner. That's what happens when we pray intimately and persistently. We "help" God's will get done on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Anybody can pray once and a while. When you're facing great danger or difficulty, 99% of us pray. That doesn't make you a disciple of Jesus! A disciple of Jesus is marked by intimate and persistent prayer. It's a lifestyle, not just some random, desperate act. If your prayer life is only comprised of occasional prayers, formal prayers, selfish prayers, or no prayer, perhaps you're not a disciple of Jesus at all.

#3. BEING FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT CONTINUALLY

The Holy Spirit was central to Jesus' own life and ministry. He was involved in the virgin birth of Jesus. The Bible says, "This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit." (Mt 1:18 NLT). The Holy Spirit both directed Jesus throughout his life and empowered His ministry. "Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River. He was led by the Spirit in the wilderness... Then Jesus returned to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit's power..." (Lk 4:1, 14 NLT). Jesus Himself said, "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News..." (Lk 4:18 NLT) The Holy Spirit enabled Jesus to endure the cross. The Bible says, "...For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins." (Heb 9:14 NLT) The Holy Spirit was even involved in the resurrection of Jesus, because the Bible says, "The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you..." (Rom 8:11 NLT)

The Holy Spirit is just as central to your own life if you're a disciple of Jesus today. You can't even become a Christian without the Holy Spirit. It was Jesus who said, "... I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life." (John 3:5-6 NLT) The Holy Spirit guides you and me into God's truth. Jesus said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth..." (John 16:13 NLT) The Holy Spirit allows us to be with Jesus here and now. We sometimes forget that even the twelve disciples had a very limited time period with Jesus literally and physically. It was three years at the most, and some Bible scholars suggest it might have only been a year and a half. Jesus had to prepare them for His return to Heaven.

I mentioned earlier how important being with the person discipling you is to the whole process of discipleship. So, how were the disciples going to continue to be with Jesus even though He was gone? Jesus said, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth..... But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you. No, I will not abandon you as orphans—I will come to you.” (John 14:16-18 NLT) You and I can be with Jesus and experience Jesus through the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. It’s not a physical thing; it’s a spiritual and very real thing. It’s exactly the same kind of relationship that Jesus made possible to those twelve men after He left them and returned to Heaven. Hear again what Jesus says, “I am telling you these things now while I am still with you. But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you.” (John 14:25-26 NLT) That promise was for them and us.

The Holy Spirit is everywhere in the book of Acts among the first disciples of Jesus. In fact, some people have suggested that instead of calling it “The Acts of the Apostles” a better name for it would be “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” Now, there’s a dimension of the Holy Spirit that we have to understand here. Every Christian, by definition, is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The Bible says, “..., you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children.” (Rom 8:15 NLT) But not every Christian is filled with the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, why would the Bible tell Christians this? “Don’t be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Eph 5:18 NLT) Why would we be told to do something that had already been done for us? No, but in that verse we hear an important analogy. Just like alcohol can exert power or dominate a person’s life in a negative way, the Holy Spirit can exert power and dominate your life and mine in a positive, God-honoring way.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit means that your life is pervaded and dominated by the Holy Spirit’s power and influence. By no means, does being filled with the Spirit mean that you are perfect and never sin. But when you do sin and the Holy Spirit convicts you, you confess it immediately and you repent. You turn away from that sin and make an effort not to commit it again. Just like getting saved, you can never earn or deserve being filled with the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit is always and forever a gift of God’s grace. You can sabotage the Spirit’s fullness in your life. How so? You can become proud. You can refuse to confess and turn away from known sin. You can stop meditating on Scripture and praying. By the same token, you can expect to be filled with God’s Spirit if you ask God humbly, sincerely, and prayerfully. Furthermore, I believe you and I can and should be filled with God’s Spirit continually or as a lifestyle.

In the book of Acts, being filled with the Spirit is mentioned ten times. It just seems like it was the normal, expected, and continual experience of a person who was a disciple of Jesus. “And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.” (Acts 2:4 NLT) “And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom.... Everyone liked this idea, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full

of faith and the Holy Spirit)....” (Acts 6:3, 5 NLT) “But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand.” (Acts 7:55) “So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’” (Acts 9:17 NLT) “Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And many people were brought to the Lord.” (Acts 11:24 NLT) “Saul, also known as Paul, was filled with the Holy Spirit....” (Acts 13:9 NLT) “And the believers were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 13:52 NLT) How important it is for us to remember that those disciples – both the original twelve and then the first Christians - were common, average people like you and me! It was the power and the fullness of the Holy Spirit combined with yielded, surrendered lives that made all the difference. It’s never who we are, but who He is that makes all the difference. Being filled with the Holy Spirit continually isn’t just for elite Christians. It’s for any and every disciple of Jesus.

So, are you filled with the Holy Spirit? If you call yourself a disciple of Jesus, you should be. Not just once five years ago. Not just occasionally. It can and should be a continual experience – a lifestyle. If you’re not filled with the Holy Spirit this morning, whose fault is that? If you’re truly born again, you’ve been given the opportunity to be filled with the Spirit every day. You’ve been given the privilege to be filled with the Spirit every moment of every day. The only one stopping you from being filled with the Holy Spirit is you. By definition, a disciple of Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit continually. If you’re not filled with the Spirit this morning and you have no interest in being filled with the Spirit, can you call yourself a disciple of Jesus?

I close today with a simple demonstration. I have here two glasses of water and two packets of Alka-Seltzer. I drop a packet of Alka-Seltzer, with the wrapper on, into one glass. What happens? Not a whole lot! Then I plopp an unsealed packet into the second glass. Ah, let’s watch it fizz for a while.... Do you see how all the water is forever changed by it? Both glasses have the Alka-Seltzer, just like all Christians have the Holy Spirit. But notice how you can have the Holy Spirit and not His filling. Notice also what should be the goal of any and every disciple of Jesus. It’s to live in such a way as to unwrap the packaging around the presence and power of the Holy Spirit within us. It’s to live this way – filled with the Holy Spirit - continually.

So how can you and I, as disciples of Jesus, actually go about following Jesus today? We can, by God’s grace and power, live in and under the Bible. We can, by God’s grace and power, pray more intimately and persistently. We can, by God’s grace and power, choose to be filled with the Holy Spirit every day all day long.