

Fan or Follower?

1 of 6 in *Following Jesus: Find Your Next Step*

May 2, 2021

Matt. 28:18-20

If you know me reasonably well, chances are you're aware that I'm a pretty big basketball fan. I grew up in Syracuse, New York, and so I've always cheered for my hometown team—the Syracuse University Orange.

And having lived in the GTA pretty much all my adult life, I'm also a huge Toronto Raptors fan. This is the unique t-shirt that they gave out to fans at Scotiabank Arena for game 7 of the Eastern Conference semifinals in 2019. That's the game where Kawhi Leonard hit "the shot" at the buzzer to defeat Philadelphia and take the series.

I wasn't actually at that game, although I did get to see an earlier playoff game in person. My wife bought me this shirt as a birthday gift back in 2019 at a comic and sports memorabilia sale in support of Cornerstone's Global Impact ministries.

That was year, as most of you know, the Raptors would go on to win their first NBA championship BABY!

A bunch of us were gathered at Cornerstone Centre to watch the Raptors win that "chip." It was glorious. Maybe you're one of the people who watched with us at Cornerstone Centre that night. If you are, type into the chat, "I was there!" Man, we were cheering and screaming and high-fiving.

Last season, the Raptors played quite well in the NBA bubble, but a couple players had their struggles and while the team came close, they didn't make it past the Eastern Conference semifinals.

And then, there's this season... a very hard season to be a Raptors fan. If you agree with that, type amen into the chat. Our boys in purple and red have had to make a temporary home in Tampa. They're the only NBA team that isn't able to play in their home arena this season due to health and safety restrictions set by the Canadian government. Not only that, the Raptors have been ravaged by injuries this season, and had to endure a COVID-19 outbreak on top of it all.

So they've had a lot stacked against them this year, and it shows in their win-loss record. And when a sports team has a rough season, what happens? What happens is that you get to see that many of the team's fans are actually fair-weather fans. Fair-weather fans love and support the team as long as it's winning, but when the team isn't doing so well, they jump right off the bandwagon as quickly as they had jumped on.

As for me, I'm sticking with my Raptors, because I'm a true blue fan. Through every high and every low, the Raps are my team. Next season will be better, I just know it.

Although what scares me a little is that Maple Leafs fans have been the very same thing each year since before I was born. The Leafs last won the cup the year before I was born. And look at me—I'm not a young man, people! Leafs fans, you are definitely not fair-weather fans. You are true blue...

Now to transition from sports to another subject, here's a question for you:

Do you think Jesus wants us to be his fair-weather fans, or his true blue fans?

It's a trick question. Because the answer is neither. Jesus isn't looking for fans. He's looking for followers— for *disciples*.

Pastor Kyle Idleman writes that in today's churches:

It may seem like there are many followers of Jesus, but if they were honestly to define the relationship they have with him I'm not sure it would be accurate to describe them as followers. It seems to me that there is a more suitable word to describe them. They are not followers of Jesus. They are fans of Jesus.

Fans of Jesus admire him from a distance, but they don't get very close. Fans of Jesus know *about* him, but they don't know *him*. Fans of Jesus sit safely in the stands, as it were, taking in the game, they are spectators who cheer for Jesus now and then—they may even buy Jesus merch along the way—but they aren't really interested in joining Jesus in the game down on the court, on the ice, on the field, on the pitch— because that's where Jesus calls all the plays for his true followers.

This morning, in the presence of God, ask yourself: Am I a follower of Jesus, or just a fan?

To be clear, you certainly don't need to be perfect to be his follower. In the gospel of Matthew, Peter is especially highlighted as an example of a less-than-perfect follower, and we can take encouragement from this. Peter's best moments as a disciple of Jesus were often quickly followed by his worst. He is much like any ordinary Christian with his victories and failures, his strengths and shortcomings.

But Jesus stuck with Peter, and Peter with Jesus, and as a result, the life of this disciple would be transformed to reflect the likeness his Master to the world around him. So in calling you to follow him, Jesus isn't looking for perfection. But he is calling you to be more than just a fan.

Today we begin a new series about discipleship called *Following Jesus: Find Your Next Step*. Discipleship is such an important subject, because our number one job as a church is to make disciples, or followers, of Jesus Christ. Cornerstone's Mission Statement— *making space for Jesus to shape people together in God's love*—is really just another way of saying that Cornerstone exists, not to make fans but rather followers of Jesus. We exist to make disciples.

In fact, we take discipleship so seriously that we've developed a 5-part framework called the Discipleship Pathway that shapes pretty much our entire approach to ministry. In today's series introduction, I'll be sharing some basic biblical teaching on discipleship followed by a brief overview of this pathway.

In the weeks that follow, we'll do a deeper dive into each of the 5 aspects of the Discipleship Pathway, and what they mean for your life.

On the final Sunday of the series, we're going to launch a custom online discipleship assessment tool that we've been developing over the past several months. It's designed to help you discern your current target growth area on the Discipleship Pathway, as well as a specific next step you can take to grow in that area. This assessment process allows you to choose from a range of excellent resources and opportunities to help you develop as a disciple of Jesus in your target growth area.

I know that I'm very excited about this series, and especially the upcoming launch of the online discipleship assessment tool. Are you excited? If so, let us know by typing "I'm excited" into the chat.

We find one of the Bible's best-known passages on discipleship at the very end of Matthew's gospel. This will be quite familiar to many of you, but I hope you'll come away with some fresh insights into this text as a result of our time together today.

Now Jesus has very recently risen from the dead, and before he ascends back into heaven, he leaves his disciples with a mission:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."¹

The Great Commission that Jesus has given to his church—both then and now—is to make disciples. What is a *disciple*, anyway?

Disciple

Someone who follows Jesus as Master.

And in basic terms, *discipleship* is the life-long process of living in daily intimate relationship with Jesus and becoming like him in character. Here's a helpful definition of discipleship that we've often shared at Cornerstone.

¹ Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV)

Discipleship

BEING with Jesus to LEARN from Jesus how to BECOME like Jesus.

As disciples follow Jesus and learn to live in his presence each day, they reflect their Master's likeness more and more. As Jesus himself puts it:

"It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master."²

But there's a common misconception about discipleship that we need to clear up before we go any further. It's the myth that discipleship is an option for so-called super-Christians—Christians who happen to be especially keen about their faith. This line of thinking assumes there are "regular" Christians, and then there are *disciples*.

We can use the analogy of car shopping to explain this myth. If you're in the market for a car, and all you're interested in is something that will reliably get you from point A to point B, chances are you'll be content with the basic model. But if you're keen about cars, and you like a ride that comes with extra bells and whistles, you'll opt for some kind of upgrade package. At the end of the day, which package you go for—the basic package or the upgrade—is up to you, the customer.

And that works just fine when it comes to cars. But not when it comes to being a Christian. Let's be very clear: For Christians, discipleship to Jesus is not an optional upgrade package; it is the only package. Pastor Kyle Idleman writes:

Many have made a decision to believe in Jesus without making a commitment to follow Jesus. The gospel allows for no such distinction... biblical belief is more than just intellectual acceptance or heartfelt acknowledgement; it is a commitment to follow [Jesus as Master]... Following is part of believing. To truly believe is to follow.

And to follow Jesus is a synonym for being his disciple. So make no mistake: **Discipleship is not optional for Christians—it's what being a Christian is all about.**

Let's go back to Matthew 28 and learn more about what discipleship to Jesus involves. First, let's note that discipleship involves **learning to obey everything Jesus has commanded.**

As Jesus says in our text:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you... ³

² Matthew 10:25a (NKJV)

³ Matthew 28:19-20a (NIV)

With divine authority, Jesus calls his followers to put his commands and teachings into practice. Matthew makes this theme very clear in chapter 7 of his gospel, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says:

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock... But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.”⁴

So disciples of Jesus are people who are actively learning to put everything Jesus said into practice—not just passively learning the content of what he said, but actually doing it.

Have you ever considered what your life would begin to look like if you got serious about putting Jesus’ words into practice? If you go by his words in Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in Matthew chapters 5-7—and I really encourage you to try to picture this in your mind’s eye— imagine yourself becoming:

- Someone who not only avoids murder and violence, but is also getting better at controlling your temper and your tongue.
- Someone who actively seeks reconciliation when relational conflict breaks out.
- Someone who not only avoids adulterous deeds, but is becoming increasingly free from lustful thoughts and habits as well.
- Someone who, if married, is fully committed to do your part in making your marriage a strong and lasting one.
- Someone who is known for honesty and integrity, whose word can be counted upon.
- Someone who is even learning to love your enemies—to actively pray for them, bless them, and seek to do them good.
- Someone who cares for the poor, without seeking to be noticed for it.
- Someone who’s learning how to really pray—and fast—without seeking to be noticed for it.
- Someone who forgives others, as God has forgiven you in Christ.
- Someone who is learning how to be content—really content— because more and more, you’re trusting God to provide for your daily needs.
- Someone who is becoming freer and freer to be radically generous with your time, talent, and treasure.
- Someone marked by serenity of mind, and a distinct absence of worry.
- Someone who is becoming less judgmental and more loving in the feelings that you feel and the thoughts that you think and the words that you speak.

⁴ Matthew 7:24, 26 (NIV)

What do you think it would be like to actually live a life like that—or at least be making authentic progress in that direction? Because that’s what a life of obedience to Jesus’ commands—a life of discipleship— should increasingly look like.

Such a life probably sounds wonderfully appealing to us on the one hand, but kind of far-fetched on the other—maybe even impossible. And that’s precisely the thing: such a life is impossible for us—*apart from the presence of Jesus*.

But it is possible with Jesus’ help. You see, obeying Jesus isn’t something we can consistently do in our own strength and effort. Rather, **obeying Jesus requires opening your life to His empowering presence.**

Let’s jump back to our text in Matthew 28. Jesus commissions his disciples to make disciples, teaching them to obey everything he has commanded. He then concludes with these words:

“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”⁵

Those are the words that make it possible for us to obey this Great Commission. If Jesus calls us to be and to make disciples who learn to obey everything he’s commanded, it must actually be possible, right? Consider that. It must actually be possible.

In fact, history plainly shows us that it has happened for countless millions of Christians—everyday folks like you and me—throughout the ages. But the only thing that makes such a remarkable life possible is living in openness to the empowering presence of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

To be a disciple is to follow Jesus, and to *follow* anyone, you need to *stay close* to that person. When you open yourself to your ever-present Master, he makes possible for you a life that would otherwise be *impossible*.

One blogger captures it well with these words:

Most Christians try to live FOR Jesus. We’d be much better off if we began living WITH Jesus.

To grow as a disciple of Jesus, don’t start by trying harder to live FOR Jesus. Start by choosing to live WITH Jesus. Spend time with him daily. Open your life to his presence as often as you think of it throughout the moments of your day, because he is always with you. It’s only his empowering presence that makes it possible for us to put his commands into practice in our lives.

⁵ Matthew 28:20b (NIV)

And when we do so, then—then—our lives will shine like a beacon for the world to see. Many will see us and say, “Wow! I didn’t know life could be like that—so abundant, loving, kind and giving; so hopeful, content, and self-controlled!”

When they ask us how we live such lives, we’ll simply point them to King Jesus, our ever-present Master. This is exactly what Jesus had in mind when he said in Matthew 5:

“... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”⁶

You see, discipleship—*being with Jesus to learn from Jesus to become like Jesus*—isn’t something we do just for our own sakes. We do it for the sake of God’s mission in Jesus to restore this fallen world. Jesus calls us to be and to make disciples who obey his commands *so that* the world will be drawn to him through the difference he makes in our lives as his presence shines through us.

Let’s use another car analogy to think about this. In some ways, the church is like a car. Its purpose is to “go”—to go into the world to share the message of the gospel of Jesus in word and deed. **Discipleship is the engine that makes the church go.** Discipleship is the engine that drives the church forward in its mission to the world.

If as a church we focus on making disciples for Jesus, we’ll go far in mission for God. But if we try to make mission happen in our own strength and effort, guess where that will get us? Absolutely nowhere. The only people I’m aware of who’ve had any measure of success at propelling an engineless car are Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble, and need I remind you, they are fictional characters.

To quote Christian leader Mike Breen, “Without a plan for making disciples any missional thing you launch will become completely unsustainable.”

This brings us to an important question: What is Cornerstone’s plan for making disciples? That’s where our Discipleship Pathway comes in.

Cornerstone’s Discipleship Pathway consists of 5 “Es” that are deeply rooted in scripture. Each “E” is a vital aspect in your development as a disciple of Jesus. All five of these elements interact dynamically and continuously throughout your lifetime as you become more and more like Jesus in character. Remember, becoming like Jesus is the goal of Christian discipleship, as the diagram illustrates.

Our Discipleship Pathway flows directly from our Mission Statement: *Making space for Jesus to shape people together in God’s love.*

⁶ Matthew 5:16 (NIV)

As I said earlier, our Mission Statement is really all about making disciples. Therefore, if our Mission is *making space for Jesus to shape people together in God's love*, how do we go about doing that? What does that look like? Our Discipleship Pathway breaks it down. Specifically, make spaces for people to:

ESTABLISH Identity in Jesus: These are spaces for Jesus to shape our sense of who we are in him. As disciples, the most important thing about us is who we are in Jesus.

We also make spaces for people to:

EMBODY the Jesus Way of Life: These are spaces for learning how to put the commands of Jesus into practice in daily life. As we've seen in this morning's message, Jesus clearly intends for us to be and to make disciples who put his commands into actual practice—to embody the way of life he modelled and taught, through his empowering presence with us.

Next, we also make spaces for people to:

EXPLORE Jesus' Call to Life Mission: These are spaces for discovering Jesus' unique callings on our lives. As followers of Jesus, we exist for the sake of God's world-restoring mission in Christ. And God uniquely gifts and calls each of us to be agents of his mission.

Next, we also makes spaces for people to:

EXTEND Jesus' Love in Life Mission: These are spaces for joining God's world-restoring mission in Jesus. The more we are shaped in the likeness of Jesus, the more we will reflect and extend his sacrificial love in every aspect of our lives. Having explored our callings, we can truly and fully engage in our unique roles as agents of God's mission.

Finally, we also make spaces for people to:

EXPERIENCE Jesus' Care & Healing: These are spaces for Jesus to make the broken and needy whole. We all know too well that life has its highs and its lows. There are times in life when each of us will need special care and healing from Jesus and his people in order to be able to get moving forward again in the journey of discipleship.

So this is our main framework for making disciples at Cornerstone. Just about every ministry we do at Cornerstone relates back to this Discipleship Pathway in some way.

As I said earlier, in the weeks to come, we'll be unpacking each one of these 5 Es and considering what it means for your life. And on the final Sunday of the series, we'll be launching our new online discipleship assessment tool that will help you discern your target growth area on the Discipleship Pathway, and a next step to take in that area.

Earlier we talked about the fact that many people make a decision to believe in Jesus without making a commitment to follow Jesus. But Jesus allows for no such distinction. To truly believe is to follow. Remember, Jesus isn't looking for fans; he's looking for followers—

for *disciples*. At this time, I'd like to give you the chance to declare that you don't want to just be a fan of Jesus, but his follower.

If you'd like to make that declaration this morning, I invite you to type into the chat right now, **"I'm a follower, not a fan."** We'll give you about 20 second to do that, and then I'll be back to lead us in the Lord's Supper. (20-second interlude with instrumental music and the words "I'm a follower, not a fan" on the screen)

COMMUNION

In the message, we talked about how Jesus is always with us as we grow as his disciples, and as we make disciples for him. One of the ways that Jesus reminds us of his Spirit's presence is the Lord's Supper—communion. Through this meal, he draws near to us, and nourishes and strengthens us with himself, reminding us that he alone is the Bread of Life. And so:

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying, "Take, eat, this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Likewise, after the supper, he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them saying, "Drink all of this, for this is my blood—the blood of the new covenant—shed for you, and for many, for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, and as often as you drink it, remember me.

May the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, given for you, now nourish your life as you follow him. Take and eat it in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your heart by faith, with thanksgiving.

And may the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, shed for you, preserve your body and soul unto everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that his blood was shed for you, and be thankful.

Amen.

BENEDICTION

Therefore go—not as my fans but as my followers— and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. Amen.