

# True Discipleship - *What It Means to Follow Jesus*

John 3:16, perhaps the most frequently cited verse in the New Testament, states, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever *believes in Him* should not perish but have everlasting life.” Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Most people reading this brochure would answer *yes* to that question. If you are among them, then for you the question is: What does it *mean* to “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ”?

Does it mean to simply believe that He exists? That’s a good belief, and a necessary one, but it’s not exactly what John 3:16 has in view. James writes, “You believe there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!” (James 2:19). The same applies to believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. The demons believe it, too (Matthew 8:28,29; Mark 5:1-7; Luke 8:27,28).

Obviously, the “belief” acceptable to God involves more than just admitting or acknowledging that something is true. To truly “believe in Jesus” is to fully *trust* Him and confidently rely upon His redemptive work. Such belief expresses itself in a self-sacrificing commitment to “walk just as He walked” (1 John 2:6).

Only those who put Jesus first in their lives can become His disciples. Listen to what He says to those who would be His disciples:

## **Requirements for Discipleship**

Jesus says, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, *he cannot be My disciple*” (Luke 14:26).

Jesus obviously does not mean that prospective disciples should actually hate their loved ones, for God repeatedly calls upon His people to love their fellow human beings. This passage is an emphatic way of stating what Matthew 10:37 states plainly: “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.”

Just as personal possessions can come between an individual and God, so can family ties. Anyone who would follow Jesus—anyone seeking to be one of His true disciples—

simply *must* make sure he puts *nothing* ahead of Christ. The word for this kind of trusting commitment is *faith*. Without it, says Jesus, we cannot be His disciples.

Jesus continues, “And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me *cannot be My disciple*” (Luke 14:27).

What does it mean to bear one’s cross? Apparently, in the ancient world this expression was a way of speaking of a one-way trip. No one who had been seen carrying his cross was ever seen returning. Further, the cross-bearer knew he faced a shameful and agonizing death.

Anyone who would follow Jesus must first realize that discipleship is a total commitment, and involves giving up everything. That’s right—*everything!* This does not mean that the prospective disciple should go out and sell all his possessions and give his money to the poor. Nor does it mean that he should be *only* willing to give up everything. It means *giving up* everything he owns. He does this not by getting rid of his belongings, but by giving up his right of ownership. He realizes that he is merely a steward, not an owner.

That’s what Jesus means when He says, “[W]hoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple” (verse 33).

The conditions Jesus establishes for discipleship and the godly attributes He advocates are without cultural boundaries. Therefore, any modern follower of Christ should pay careful attention to what Jesus taught His first disciples.

### **The Sermon on the Mount**

The famous “Sermon on the Mount” is recorded in the fifth through seventh chapters of Matthew’s Gospel. It begins with the Beatitudes, or “Blessed are” statements, and is largely made up of Jesus’s instruction on the proper application of the laws and commandments of the Old Testament.

Jesus did not overthrow or radically revise or redefine the Old Testament law, as many suppose. Instead, He stripped away the erroneous interpretations that had been added to the law, and brought out what its true purpose and meaning had been all along. He emphasized the “weightier matters” of the law—those principles of godliness that underscore the importance of love, faithfulness, mercy, and humility.

To the scribes and Pharisees who put the so-called “oral law,” or “tradition of the elders,” on an equal standing with the Scriptures, Jesus’s restoration of the original intent and purpose of the Torah must have appeared to be an abrogation of the law. No doubt, this is why Jesus declared that He had no intentions of abolishing the law. He said:

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17-19).

In the message that follows, Jesus points out that murder and adultery begin in the heart (Matthew 5:21-28); that marriage is sacred (verses 31,32); and that a person should love even his enemies (verses 43-47). While He departs considerably from the interpretations of many of the religious leaders of His day, Jesus is in complete harmony with the laws and commandments of the Old Testament. The Torah calls for deeds of kindness and mercy toward enemies (Exodus 23:4,5); forbids hating a brother (Leviticus 19:17); commands its hearers to love “as yourself” both countrymen and visiting foreigners (Leviticus 19:18,34); condemns coveting (lusting after) the possessions of another (Exodus 20:17); and calls for honesty, fairness, and respect in dealing with others (Exodus 23:1-9; Leviticus 19:13-18). Even the law permitting divorce and remarriage is actually designed to preserve the sanctity of marriage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

Clearly, there is no contradiction between the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of the Torah. His esteem of the Old Testament should inspire His prospective followers to adopt a healthy new respect for the only texts Jesus and the apostles knew as Scripture. Anyone who seriously pursues a study of these Scriptures will soon discover that both the Law and the Prophets speak of Christ, and that the righteous standards set forth in the Torah are perfectly exemplified in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

The godly attributes described in the Beatitudes are right out of the Old Testament, and Jesus expects anyone who would take up his cross and follow Him to adopt these attributes as his own. Let’s examine each.

### **‘Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit’**

Jesus opens His famous “Sermon on the Mount” with the well-known Beatitudes, or “Blessed are” statements. There are nine of them, and each describes some attribute of the godliness Jesus demands of His disciples. In the first, He calls for a spirit of humility. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” He says, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).

What does “poor in spirit” mean? It means to be humble. It is the opposite of arrogance, conceit, and pride. The “poor in spirit” are those who have the attitude of poor people, even though they may be wealthy. They are not haughty, do not “look down their noses” at people less fortunate than themselves, and do not take lightly God’s commandments.

God says, “But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isaiah 66:2b).

Jesus Himself exemplified this attribute when He stooped down to wash the feet of His disciples. He said, “You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you....If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:13-17).

The “foot-washing” attitude Jesus emphasized is the opposite of the self-promoting spirit that is so prevalent in today’s “dog-eat-dog” world. A haughty, self-serving, self-centered, and self-promoting spirit leads only to strife, damaged relationships, and inner turmoil. Until such a spirit is broken, a person simply *cannot* come to true repentance! This is why God links the “poor and contrite spirit” with trembling at His Word.

Paul writes, “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself” (Philippians 2:4). He urges his fellow followers of Jesus to imitate the example of their Lord and Savior, who took upon Himself “the form of a bondservant,” and “humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death” (verses 7,9).

It is significant that “poor in spirit” heads the list of Beatitudes. Unless a person humbles himself—unless he casts off the old shackles of self-conceit, vanity, arrogance, and self-promoting pride—he will be unable to adopt the attributes described in the remaining Beatitudes.

Putting off the old self is a part of bearing one’s own cross. “And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me,” says Jesus, “he cannot be My disciple.”

### **‘Blessed Are Those Who Mourn’**

In the second of His Beatitudes, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4).

What is so virtuous about mourning? Do not even the wicked mourn? Indeed, they do, but they do not mourn for the abominations of the earth. They do not lament the evils of society.

In a vision given to the prophet Ezekiel, God said to a man who carried a writer’s inkhorn, “Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who *sigh and cry over all the abominations* that are done within it.” God commanded the man’s companions, each carrying a battle-ax, to go through the city and slay everyone except those with the mark on their foreheads (see Ezekiel 9:1-6).

We cannot “cry and sigh over all the abominations” of the land if we do not recognize them for what they are! Calling homosexual activity, “normal” and “healthy,” or describing it as an acceptable “alternative” lifestyle, can only contribute to such spiritual blindness. Transforming immorality into something less serious than it is can only lead to indifference where moral and ethical standards are concerned.

Those who would follow Jesus must carefully guard against this spirit of indifference. Compromising with the influences of the world is all too easy. Even the early followers of Christ were affected. To those who were permitting evil influences to draw them into “friendship with the world” (James 4:4), James wrote, “Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up” (verses 9,10).

Those who mourn—those who *abhor* evil and *loathe* the fruits of wickedness—will be comforted.

### **‘Blessed Are the Meek’**

Next, Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5).

The Greek term translated “meek” denotes gentleness, and refers to a spirit that is opposite of the spirit of contention and self-promotion. Today, the term *meekness* is often associated with weakness and shyness, but this is *not* what Jesus has in mind when He speaks of meekness.

Meekness is closely associated with humility (Colossians 3:12). In fact, it may be said that the non-contentious spirit known as meekness is an attribute of humility. It is the spirit that does not fight against God, but willingly accepts His will and believes His Word. It is that spirit that does not lash out in vengeance when insulted or hurt by the damaging words of others. The meek person is able to look beyond the pain of the moment and realize that all trials and sufferings are purifying for those who faithfully endure (James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6,7).

A meek person is not occupied with self. That’s why he is able to refrain from seeking retribution when wronged. Jesus encourages meekness in His followers when He says, “...love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

Meekness is an absolute requirement for spiritual leadership. A person should not be in an office of spiritual leadership unless he is “not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous” (1 Timothy 3:3). If a leader does not have these qualities, he cannot effectively teach his congregation “to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men” (Titus 3:1,2).

Throughout history, the proud and the mighty have ruled the kingdoms of this world. But ultimately, it is not the great generals and warriors who shall prevail. Instead, the *meek* shall inherit the earth!

If you want to follow Jesus, then it is essential that you pursue the way of meekness.

### **‘Blessed Are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness’**

The fourth of the Beatitudes calls for diligence in seeking the will of God for one’s life. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” says Jesus, “for they shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6).

What is “righteousness”? The psalmist writes, “For all Your commandments are righteousness” (Psalm 119:172). This simply means that the divine revelation contained within the pages of Scripture inform us of what is right and just. The commandments of God reflect the righteous nature of God Himself. The laws forbidding murder, adultery, theft, dishonesty, and lust are summed up in the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Romans 13:9; cf. Leviticus 19:18). Love, therefore, “is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10). John writes, “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). This means that God, in His very nature, is love.

The disposition of the person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness is well expressed in the words of the psalmist: “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.... How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Psalm 119:97,103).

God’s Word teaches that the righteousness of God cannot be obtained through human efforts, but must be imputed through means of faith on the part of the person seeking such righteousness. It is important to realize, however, that the faith “accounted for righteousness” (Romans 4:5) is a faith that produces the *fruits* of righteousness. In other words, if the faith a person professes is *real* faith, or “saving faith,” it will produce the fruit of obedience to God’s commandments.

A person who claims to be “saved by faith,” but has no intentions of obeying God’s commandments, *is not saved at all!* A “faith” that produces no works is a *dead* faith (James 2:20). Genuine faith is more than merely a belief that God exists (James 2:19). It is a state of mind that expresses itself in obedience to God’s will. The person having such faith yearns to bring every motive, every thought, every action into conformity with the righteous character of Jesus Christ.

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness means forsaking every way that is contrary to the way of life revealed in God’s law and exemplified in the life of Jesus. Anyone who “does not forsake all that he has,” says Jesus, “cannot be My disciple.

### **‘Blessed Are the Merciful’**

Jesus continues, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:7).

Being merciful is more than merely possessing feelings of pity toward the downtrodden. Mercy is *active* compassion. It is as much an action as it is an internal attribute.

God Himself is described throughout Scripture as a merciful God. His sending His Son to die for the sins of the world was the ultimate expression of mercy.

Christ is a “merciful and faithful High Priest” (Hebrews 3:17). Having experienced suffering in the flesh, He is actively interceding on behalf of those who turn to God in repentance and faith.

Jesus urges His followers to practice acts of mercy, not only for their loved ones, but even for their enemies. Listen to His words:

“But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. *Therefore, be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful*” (Luke 6:32-36).

There is an exercise you can do—something you can begin doing immediately—that will produce within you characteristics resembling those of the Father. Simply look for opportunities to do good to others, including those who do not like you, and then *do* them. Human behavioral science informs us that external actions influence our internal characteristics. This means that *acts* of mercy produce the internal quality of compassion.

The merciful, Jesus says, will obtain mercy. If you are serious about following Jesus, then make sure that your relationships and interactions with others are characterized by merciful kindness.

### **‘Blessed Are the Pure in Heart’**

The sixth of the Beatitudes goes to the heart of true spirituality. “Blessed are the pure in heart,” says Jesus, “for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

The “heart” is the inner person. It includes the motives, feelings, thoughts, and entire mental and emotional makeup. Sinful thoughts produce acts of evil, and pure thoughts produce godly behavior. It’s a simple equation.

Sin begins in the heart. From the heart, says Jesus, “proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matthew 15:19).

The contents of the heart cannot be hidden. If a person’s thoughts and motives are not made evident in deeds, they will find expression in words. Jesus says, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things” (Matthew 12:35).

The pure in heart are those who think pure thoughts. Like the psalmist, they meditate on God’s law “all the day” (Psalm 119:97). They do not allow thoughts of evil to take root in their minds, but cast them out as soon as they enter. They pray daily that God will “not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matthew 6:13), and realize that, having requested God’s help in preserving the purity of their hearts, they have the responsibility of staying out of temptation’s way (1 Corinthians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:22; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22).

Murder begins in the heart (Matthew 5:21,23). Adultery begins in the heart (verses 27,28). Harboring hatred or entertaining lustful thoughts will eventually lead to the action.

If you are serious about following Jesus, then deal with sinfulness by “bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

### **‘Blessed Are the Peacemakers’**

In the seventh of His Beatitudes, Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:10).

The peacemaker is the person who seeks reconciliation where it is possible. A short but powerful lesson in peacemaking is found in Matthew 5:23-26, which follows Jesus’s teaching on the spirit of murder. Jesus says:

“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.”



Religious acts (bringing your gift to the altar) are empty if moral responsibility (reconciliation with your brother) is neglected. If a person is not willing to seek reconciliation with an alienated brother, or make efforts toward turning an adversarial relationship into a friendship, then he can never be the “salt of the earth” or “light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-16).

The ultimate Peacemaker is God Himself, who sent His Son to die for the sins of the world, thus making peace with those who were alienated from God (Colossians 1:20). The peacemaker recognizes the hypocrisy of refusing to seek peace with someone Christ died for.

The peacemaker may be defined negatively as the opposite of a talebearer, a gossip, a fault-finder, a slanderer, or a rabble-rouser. Positively, he is the person who is willing to sacrifice personal pleasures in order to live peaceably with others.

Paul exhorted Timothy to make sure “that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence” (1 Timothy 2:1,2). The apostle’s exhortation is as valid for today’s disciples of Jesus as it was for the disciples of the first century.

### **‘Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted’**

The final two “Blessed are” statements call for righteousness and patience, but speak of conditions that should not be sought or desired. They speak of the persecution the followers of Jesus—those who have adopted the attributes described in the preceding Beatitudes—can expect to experience.

Jesus says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:10-12).

Since its inception, the Church of God has been persecuted. At times, persecution has been severe; thousands of Christ’s followers have died under the hands of the wicked. At other times, persecution has come in the form of lies and evil reports. Whatever form it takes, and to whatever degree its intensity, Jesus tells His followers to rejoice and be glad. This is a call for patience and faith, and exhortation to continue faithfully pursuing righteousness in spite of the accompanying hardships.

If you “take up your cross” and set out on that one-way path made by the footprints of Jesus, there’s a good chance that you will eventually face persecution. If so, remember the words of your Master: “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad.”

## **What About You?**

You now know that true discipleship involves bearing your cross and forsaking all that you own as you set out on a rocky and, at times, difficult one-way path; putting on the most excellent attributes that grow out of a truly humble spirit; filling your mind with the pure Word of God; accepting persecution when it comes your way; and relying on God to help in times of need.

Are you still serious about following Jesus? Have you truly “counted the cost” (Luke 14:28)?

If, after studying the material above, your answer is yes, then you should consider the next step—baptism.

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