

# HOW TO FOLLOW JESUS IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

By Greg Sidders

My favorite movie scene begins with a close-up of sandled feet walking away from the camera, kicking up dust in slow-motion. The camera pans upward, revealing a familiar form. Jesus. He stops, turns to the camera and, with a smile and a beckoning finger, invites the viewer to follow him. Then he turns back and continues walking.

Again he stops and turns around. The smile is broader, the gesture bolder. He waves his arm as if to say, “Come on!” The image freezes, and I melt. That’s because those few, silent seconds capture visually what happened to me spiritually on the day Jesus called me to follow him.

I had grown up going to church, but inside the oyster shell of songs and sermons, sacraments and Sunday School, there was no pearl. I went through the motions, but somehow I missed Jesus.

And then, suddenly, unexpectedly, long after I abandoned religion, there he was. *Greg*, he said to me, not audibly but unmistakably, *you have been running away from me long enough. Now turn around and follow me.*

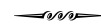
So I did follow him—right into a subculture I never knew existed. Almost immediately the close up of Jesus widened to reveal a carnival midway of hawkers and barkers, offering me a distracting plethora of spiritual growth aids. Books with the 10 steps or seven keys or five principles or three secrets or one missing ingredient to the successful Christian life. Niche Bibles for every imaginable special interest. Conferences with radio ministry speakers.

Concerts with celebrity artists. They all promised to help me follow Jesus, but the net affect was a deficit of attention on him.

I don’t know if the Christian subculture has tried to swallow you up yet, but let me tell you before you get sucked in: Christianity is a poor substitute for Christ. No religious system, no doctrinal creed, no church, no denomination will satisfy your soul. Only Jesus can do that.

I know what you’re thinking. *Duh. Why is this guy stating the obvious?* Here’s why: because, if following Jesus takes you down the same path I have traveled, you will have to set your face like flint to keep from being “led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3, NASB). You’re going to be tempted to believe that life is in the optional extras, but it’s not. Life is in Jesus.

So don’t get sidetracked. Steer clear of Christian fads and just follow Jesus.



*But how do I do that? you may be wondering—especially since he’s not here physically. What does following Jesus look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

I wrestled with that question as a young Christian. I was eager do anything that anyone told me would help me be a better disciple, and someone said, “You need a life purpose statement.” So I read books and listened to tapes on how to formulate a life purpose statement, but I couldn’t break free from the thought that my purpose in life had already been determined by

the choice I made to follow Jesus. Finally I just wrote it down: *As a disciple of Jesus Christ, my calling and my passion in life is to follow Him.*

Then I thought, deeply and biblically, about what it means to follow Him, and this is how I broke it down: to *know* Him, to *imitate* Him, and to *obey* Him.

The more I have studied Scripture since that time, the more convinced I am that discipleship can pretty much be reduced to those three commitments. Let me show you some passages that have put muscle on bone for me.



Look first at the words Jesus prayed to God the Father right before His arrest:

“Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*”

—John 17:1-3

How did Jesus define eternal life? He defined it as *knowing* God—both God the Father and God the Son.

At first that statement didn’t make sense to me, because knowing God is something that happens in the present, whereas eternal life is a something that will happen in the future. So, I wondered, how can knowing God be synonymous with eternal life? Then I discovered that the phrase “eternal life” is not referring just to the *duration* of our life, but also to the *quality* of it. Eternal life means *life that will last forever*, yes, but it also means *life as it will be forever*. So Jesus is not just saying that those who know God will live for eternity; He is saying that the way to experience the life of eternity, right here and now, is to know God—both Father and Son.

And how do we get to know the Father? By getting to know the Son!

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

—John 1:18

One of the main reasons Jesus came to this earth was to show us what God is like. He was “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). He was “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3). He was “God in a bod” (I forget who said that, but how could I forget such concise theology?). So if we want to know God, all we have to do is read the four biographies of Jesus in the Bible—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

When I was a new Christian, hungry for truth, I walked into a two-story Christian bookstore one day with floor-to-ceiling shelves on both floors. Of all the book spines that could have caught my eye, the one that did had these words printed on its thin spine: *A Harmony of the Words and Works of Jesus Christ*. I pulled it out from between the thicker books on either side and opened it, and what I found inside was a treasure. J. Dwight Pentecost (Zondervan, 1981) had put the life of Jesus in chronological order, with the four Gospels in parallel columns, so that whenever more than one gospel described the same event or quoted the same teaching, it put them side-by-side. There’s no added commentary in the book, just Scripture. I have read it from cover to cover so many times that the binding has disintegrated. It’s now in a three-ring binder, and it’s so precious to me that if a fire broke out in my office, it would be one of the first things I would grab. It’s by far my favorite book, other than the Bible itself, because through it, I have

come to *know* Jesus—which is to say, I have found the life of eternity.

It is available to you, too, right there in the Gospels. Have you read them? Recently? What are you reading in your devotional times these days? May I recommend the Gospel of Matthew? Or Mark. Or Luke. Or John. Or all of the above. Trust me, there's life there—because Jesus is there.



But following him requires more than just knowing him. It also involves *imitating* Him. Jesus told us that in John 13, the chapter in which he showed his disciples how much he loved them by getting down on his hands and knees and washing their feet. When he finished, he returned to his place at the table and said:

“Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

—John 13:12-17

Did you catch that? Jesus is not only our master, he is also our model. To follow him means to emulate him. And when we emulate him, God blesses us. I’m not sure I know exactly what that means, but I know I want it.

I have heard many people who worship Jesus say that it is unrealistic to think we can imitate him. But that’s not what the apostles said. The apostle Paul said, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). The apostle Peter said that “Christ [left us] an example, that [we] should follow in his steps”

(1 Peter 2:21). The apostle John said, “Those who say that they live in [Christ] must live the same way he lived” (1 John 2:6, God’s Word).

Jeff Collins was the founder of Love & Action, a Christian ministry to those who are HIV-positive or living with AIDS. He wrote about a phone call he received at the end of an exhausting week (Christian Reader, March/April 1998):

“Jeff! It’s Jimmy!” I heard a quivering voice say. Jimmy, who suffered from several AIDS-related illnesses, was one of our regular clients. “I’m really sick, Jeff. I’ve got a fever. Please help me.”

I was angry. After a 60-hour workweek, I didn’t want to hear about Jimmy. But I promised to be right over. Still, during the drive, I complained to God about the inconvenience.

The moment I walked in the door, I could smell the vomit. Jimmy was on the sofa, shivering and in distress. I wiped his forehead, then got a bucket of soapy water to clean up the mess. I managed to maintain a facade of concern, even though I was raging inside.

Jimmy’s friend, Russ, who also had AIDS, came down the stairs. The odor made Russ sick, too.

As I cleaned the carpet around Russ’s chair, I was ready to explode inside. Then Russ startled me. “I understand! I understand!”

“What, Russ?” Jimmy asked weakly.

“I understand who Jesus is,” Russ said through tears. “He’s like Jeff!” Weeping, I hugged Russ and prayed with him. That night Russ trusted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior—a God who had used me to show his love in spite of myself.

A 20<sup>th</sup> century French artist by the name of George Rouault painted hundreds of portraits of Jesus, and when he was asked why, he said: “My only objective is to paint a Christ so moving that those who see him will be converted.”

You too are creating for others a portrait of Christ—not with oils or acrylics but with

actions—and every time you do what Jesus did, you add a brushstroke to that portrait.



But following Jesus means even more than knowing and imitating Him. It also requires *obeying* Him. In fact, obedience is the essence of discipleship.

“...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.”

—Matthew 28:19-20

We have a tendency to interpret those words *everything I have commanded you* as *all of Scripture*. I agree that we should obey every command in the Bible, but that is not what Jesus said in his Great Commission. He was more specific than that. He defined a disciple as someone who obeys everything *he* has commanded.

In John 8:31, Jesus said to a group of so-called believers: “If you hold to *my* teaching, you are really my disciples.” In John 14:21, he said: “Whoever has *my* commands and keeps them is the one who loves me.” A few verses later, he added this: “If you keep *my* commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love” (John 15:10). And don’t miss what he said next: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

Have you, since the day you started following Jesus, felt complete joy? I’ll bet you have. If you have served a meal to a homeless person, or purchased groceries for food pantries, or sponsored a child through a relief organization, you have felt the joy of doing for the least of Christ’s brothers and sisters what you would do for Jesus himself. If you have volunteered at church to push a vacuum cleaner or set up chairs or change diapers in the nursery, you have felt the joy of washing others’ feet. If you have shared your faith story with someone you care about, you have felt the joy of being Christ’s witness. You know, by experience, that joy is what Jesus gives to those who do what he wants. Joy is not found in acing theology quizzes. It is not found in doing all the things that we have been told by everybody except Jesus that we must do to be a good Christian. It is not found in buying Christian products or attending Christian events. It is found in obeying Christ.

Let’s review. What must you do to experience a foretaste of heaven? Jesus said in John 17:3 that you must *know* him.

When do you feel God’s pleasure deep down? Jesus says in John 13:17 that it is when you *imitate* him.

How do you capture incomparable happiness? Jesus said in John 15:10-11 that you will experience the complete joy of relishing His love if you *obey* Him.

Know Jesus. Imitate Jesus. Obey Jesus. That’s what it means to follow Jesus. And that’s where you will find what you were looking for when you first said *yes* to him.