

FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

Are you a “Follower of Jesus”? Am I?

It is one of the most important and far-reaching concepts in all of Christendom. It brings me up short over and over again. It also inspires and instructs me when I start to get confused about who I am, what I am trying to do, and how I am going about it. If I am a Follower of Jesus, that takes away a huge array of choices, motives, and purposes that are open to other people but which are no longer open for me. Life gets clearer and harder, only I start liking it a lot better.

At the same time, being a Follower of Jesus is now such a familiar, overused, and hackneyed phrase that, in the way it is used in most circles today, it means absolutely nothing. Is every member of every church around the world a Follower of Jesus? Who are we to say? So in the absence of clear authority to evaluate anything, do we all say “yea”? Or maybe we all say “nay, there are no true Followers of Jesus.” You would have a hard time trying to sell me that. I have met and do know too many of them.

On the other hand, I know lots of people today who do not care about being Followers of Jesus. They know little about Him, and they could not care less what He thinks or might want from them. They have their own lives to live, their own purposes and hopes and goals, and Jesus seems long ago and irrelevant to anything they really care about. This is not a huge point, in my view. I am not likely to have a very deep or meaningful relationship with people who feel this way, nor are they going to want to have much to do with me. In the old phrase: they go their way and I go mine. We simply need to stay aware that more and more people in our culture and time do feel this way. You are not going to have a deep and meaningful conversation about being Followers of Jesus with people who do not care about Jesus.

But maybe here, and in places like this, we can still have such conversations, or at least start them. I suppose we are about to see. Meanwhile, does it matter – even to us – whether we or anybody else is a Follower of Jesus? It matters to me. The LIFE of this church depends upon it. Some of you will tell me I am jumping into the deep end way too fast, and you are right. On the other hand, as a few of you

have noticed, I am getting old. I am running out of time. That does not mean I have to be in a hurry or impatient on any soul-level. But this church started into a nosedive that some of you are already pulling us out of (with the help of the Spirit), and that was a warning shot across the bow. If we are all Followers of Jesus, what has just happened here cannot happen.

WAIT JUST A MINUTE! Hold the phone, stop the presses, and back up with me for a minute. Everything that matters in Christendom – from theology to faith, to purpose, to church politics – is about relationships. It is the biggest theme of Jesus’ whole life. It calls to us from every parable, every encounter, every teaching and decision of Jesus’ life. Never mind the outside; screw the rules – focus on the relationships. It takes us a while to see how deep this goes, how it pervades everything in the New Testament, how it calls to us from every page. It was so new, threatening, and astounding that it broke Judaism into a whole new religion. God is love: Love one another. “If I do everything right, with incredible devotion, but have not love, I am what? Nothing!” We hear it, know it, think we get it, yet it is a love far different and deeper than our culture and society want to think about. Our Lord did not go to the Cross because of the rules or the theories or to honor past traditions. How much does God love you? That Cross is how much! Everything in Christendom that matters is about relationships.

So whether we are all Followers of Jesus or not, some people stopped believing that some of the other people around here were really trying to follow Jesus. And Satan jumped in immediately. He always does. It is Satan’s top priority to weaken and, if possible, to destroy relationships. I have never seen this clearly enough until quite recently. Satan does not care about the context, the purpose, or the meaning of the relationships. If he can weaken or destroy a relationship, he knows it will weaken God’s Kingdom.

Did you get married? Guess what? Satan will destroy your relationship if he can find any way to do so. If you are married, you signed up for a war with Satan. Didn’t they teach you that in Sunday School? Satan will try to make you think your problems are with each other. He has always been known as the “Father of Lies.” If you stay close to the Spirit, you will love each other more and more. But one way or another, Satan will drive wedges between you any way he can. If you have eyes to see, you will see it going on everywhere around you.

Churches; companies; every organization; every partnership, friendship, agreement, covenant bond – Satan is trying to weaken and destroy the relationships.

Satan has been having a wonderful time here in this church. He has convinced a lot of you that some of the rest of you are not really Followers of Jesus. And he has produced the evidence. Since none of us is perfect, there is always plenty of evidence, and Satan is very good at pointing this out. Of course, he never mentions the other side of the coin: the true intentions; the devotion we do have; the efforts we do make; the time and caring and hope and prayer we do put in. And since we all secretly know that it is not enough and not pure enough in our own lives, it is not very hard for Satan to convince us that it is not really true or pure enough in the lives of others.

You may not appreciate this remark, but from my perspective this is a high compliment. This is a wonderful church with many incredible people in it. You have purpose and destiny beyond what you see, and beyond what most of the churches I know about have. How surprising is it that Satan has seen you as a prime target – a real danger to his purposes? You have been finding it harder and harder. For many of you, it has been getting bleak and discouraging. You think that's all an accident? You imagine that's just because a few of you made some mistakes or didn't do everything right? It is a bigger topic than we have time for right now, but my guess is that Jesus is pretty proud of you, and that He is gathering all kinds of resources to turn the tide. Often the Spirit has to wait for the right timing before staging a true counterattack. Well, I am out of my depth, but Satan is not the only player on the field. We shall see what we shall see.

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Jesus wants Followers. The Scripture passage makes that really clear. In His own life on earth, Jesus needed, wanted, and went looking for and invited people to be His Followers. His mission and purpose depended on it. What this passage does not make clear is that Jesus is still doing that today. Jesus still needs and wants Followers. Then, of course, the questions for each of us switch to: Has Jesus called me to be a Follower? And what was and is my response to this invitation?

Is every member of every church a Follower of Jesus? Don't be ridiculous. And we are not talking about perfection, flaws we have not overcome, or wounds that have not yet been healed. We are talking

about a relationship thing; a heart thing; a soul hunger thing. I have been lost often enough to know that I do not know the WAY. I have made enough mistakes to know that going after what I want or think is right will always betray me in the end. I have been in charge of my own life enough times to know that this never gets me where I want to go. But I have also watched Jesus with growing awe and wonder. Increasingly – not just once and not with some careless certainty – but increasingly and dimension after dimension, I say to Him: “If you are willing to lead, I really want to follow.”

So now I have to digress again for a bit.

What does it even mean, to follow Jesus?

A.) Some people, very sincerely, try to follow Jesus by paying attention to Bible verses that they are convinced give them the key to doing things, living, and believing the way Jesus wants them to. I am often impressed with their devotion, their discipline, and even the quality of their integrity and moral standards. Most of them live far better lives now than they did before they became Jesus’ Followers.

Even so, I am not always impressed with their relationships. And as you know, that is core and key for me. Far more significant for me, I do not want to be a Follower of the Bible. I want to be a Follower of Jesus. And the two are not synonymous. (We could pause for a long argument, but not today.) The Bible is not the Word of God. Actually, it is the Bible that keeps reminding me: “*The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.*” Jesus is the Word of God. The Bible does not love me – Jesus does. There are endless situations, people, circumstances, and choices that the Bible cannot help me with, except in generic principles. But Jesus can – if I am willing to listen and follow.

B.) I have known others, very sincere and sometimes even inspiring, who “follow Jesus” by continually asking themselves “What would Jesus do in this situation?” “If Jesus were here now, how would He deal with this person; this dilemma; this opportunity?” That’s pretty serious and sincere – no question about it.

I might be a much better Christian if I could figure out how to work with such questions. But alas, my life moves too fast, and I am too slow in most circumstances to translate first-century Palestine realities into the world I live in quick enough to get any help with what I am actually facing and dealing with in real time. Far more daunting

is that over and over it becomes painfully obvious that I am not Jesus. I do not have the depth, the awareness, the spiritual connections, or the gifts that Jesus has. I do not have the same assignments, the same vocatio, or the same identity that Jesus has. So it might be a fun exercise for me to ask “What would Jesus do?” – if we just want to play parlor games.

What would Jesus do if He were here in person right now? He would probably heal this person, or convert that person, or tell a mind-blowing parable, or go off to pray all night. But that was Him. I have good days and bad days, but on my very best days I cannot come anywhere close to doing what Jesus would be able to do. I am not trying to *be* Him. I just want to be a Follower of His. And I am convinced that if I want to be a true Follower, I will have to follow Him as who I really am. I am even convinced that He keeps wanting me to be the best version of me that I can be – with His help. That never translates into my being Him. Not even close.

C.) What does the Living, Resurrected Jesus – the Holy Spirit, with whom I have a current, active relationship, and with whom I have an ongoing dialogue based on trust and love – do? What are the hints, the guidance, the reminders, and the help that are coming from the Living Spirit, who knows exactly what I am facing and exactly what I am and am not capable of? If I seek that connection, obey those hints, and take those inner murmurs and insights with a true and willing heart, THAT is when and the way that I am a Follower of Jesus. And in those times – those far too many times – when I get too busy, too bullheaded, or too distracted to pay true attention to the Spirit’s guidance, then I have ceased to be a Follower of Jesus. If I am not following, I am not a Follower. How amazing is that? Can you track such deep theological logic? If I am not following, I am not a Follower. And when I notice this – when I become aware that I have strayed from the Path – it is an urgent thing for me to get back to being a Follower. If I do not, it will not be long before repentance and forgiveness and amends are in order.

Of course, most of us know some people who are clear, certain, and sure that they know and completely understand the will of God in nearly any and all circumstances. “God told me this; God told me that.” This is neither the attitude nor the experience of any of the true Followers I know about. It most certainly was not the attitude or claim of the Apostle Paul, who wandered clear across Turkey

for weeks trying to discern what the Resurrected Lord was wanting him to do next.

Nor was it the attitude or claim of Jesus. Jesus was so unclear, so puzzled, that He spent forty days and nights in the wilderness trying to get His instructions and His purpose clear, and wanting to make sure that He was not falling into any of Satan's traps. And it was not just the one time: all night in prayer before choosing the twelve; off on retreat again and again – to Caesarea Philippi, to Sidon, to Gerasa. If the top ace of all time was spending that much time checking and rechecking His guidance, that is reason enough for us to be weary and leery of those who make it all sound canned, easy, or automatic.

In closing, and for me a kind of summary of what we have been trying to say: I want to direct your attention to this comment in John 8:12. It is one of the clearest and most straightforward comments in John's entire Gospel. And therefore we usually make it exceedingly ethereal and vague, until it sounds so spiritually advanced that we get almost nothing from it.

“Once again Jesus addressed the people: ‘I am the light of the world. No follower of mine shall walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.’”

Is that a promise? It sounds like a promise to me. So if we are walking in darkness, it follows that we are not Followers. Did I overstep that? When it starts feeling dim or dark; if I am getting too confused (I don't mean about theories or obtuse notions of theoretical truth); if I am getting lost about what I am supposed to be doing in my own life on a daily basis – the first thing to check is my “following.” If I am a Follower of His, I will have the “light of life.” Isn't that what we just read, what we just got promised?

So now we should get all vague and go have a two-hour discussion with each other about “what is light,” is there any real truth, do Christians know more than Buddhists or Democrats, and who among us is the most enlightened.

We may love to get obtuse; sometimes it makes us feel like we are off the hook a little bit. But Jesus is not being obtuse. He is promising that if we follow Him, we will have Him to be with us and to guide us. Isn't that what He just said?

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“I am the light of the world.” So what is the light of life? Jesus is. That is what He just said. And no Follower will be without this light. No Follower will be without His presence, His help, His guidance. “Every Follower shall have the light of life: ME. I am the light of the world. If anyone follows me, they will have ME to guide and light their lives.”

Stop making everything vague and ethereal. Be a sincere and serious Follower, and Jesus, our Risen Lord, will be with you and stay with you – to lead and to guide; to empower and to inspire. And that is a promise. Scarier than Hell, but still a promise.