

Apprentice to Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] About a hundred years ago in the American Midwest, a boy grew up absolutely fascinated with circuses. He just heard so many things about the circus and all through his childhood he just dreamt of possibly seeing one one day. So you can imagine how excited he was when one day a poster went up in the town where he lived announcing that a circus was coming the following month. It cost a dollar to go in which hundreds or so years ago was quite a lot of money to him. He pleaded with his parents and they said that provided he did some work around the farm then they would give him the dollar and he could go to the circus.

So he worked really hard and he got so excited about this big event and eventually the big day came round and he went into the farmhouse kitchen. His mother gave him his one dollar bill and he ran as fast as he could across the fields into the town. As he approached he stood there and he could hear the sounds of the circus and he could hear the sounds of music. He could, as he stood by the side of the road, he then watched as the circus walked past and he saw acrobats, he saw jugglers, sword swallows, fire eaters, he saw animals, he saw all sorts of different things. And eventually after what seemed like quite a long time feeling really really excited and really full of the experience, he took out his dollar bill and handed it to a passing clown before making his way back home. He thought he'd seen the circus.

He had, but it wasn't. It was the circus parade. Now you may have heard me tell that story before, it's quite an old one, but I share it with you today because it helps us understand, it helps us into what is a really really vital thing when it comes to Christian discipleship. The longer you've been a follower of Jesus, the more at risk you are at thinking that you've experienced all there is to experience of him.

And the longer that you've been coming to church, the more familiar you are with the songs and the words of the Bible and Christian books that you may have read and talks you may have heard, the more you can feel that you've been there and you've done it and there's nothing more to be had.

Such that if we're not careful, and particularly when we combine that with the emphasis that we quite rightly place on Christian faith being something that you have to make a decision for, and that it's something that we need to decide over, you know, someone else can't make a decision for you, you need to decide to follow Jesus. We emphasize that so much, such that we can end up unwittingly with a version of the gospel which effectively says that becoming a Christian is an event that happens in a time and a place, or maybe a build-up gradually to it, but that moment of decision is made, and we lose sight of the reality that the Christian gospel and everything that it says is not about just that moment of decision initially to follow Jesus, but a whole life of growing and maturing in Jesus. And that is what we're talking about when we talk about discipleship. That the gospel is not about a message that you make a decision over and then that's it, but rather it's a message that we need to be refilled with and refilled with, a message that says to us that God is somebody who wants us to know and to grow in him, in us, more and more and more every single day.

[4 : 05] During the great revivals of the 1700s in this country, broadly speaking, there were many more, but there were two particular key figures. One was Whitfield and the other was Wesley. And it was often said that of the two preachers, Whitfield was more dynamic. People would come to hear him and perhaps more initially changed by his message. But of Wesley, although he was also pretty dynamic, the thing that set apart the whole what came to be known as the Methodist movement was because Wesley understood that coming to faith in Christ, yes it may be an event, but it's just the beginning, not the end point. Such that he invested everything, not just into telling people about Jesus, but in in arranging people into groups and they called them classes in those days, but people that would join these groups and meet in people's homes and with the expectation that they would grow and keep on growing. And this found its way into Wesley's theology. He said this, when you have attained a measure of perfect love, when God has enabled you to love him with all your heart and all your soul, get this, he said, think not of resting there. That is impossible. And here he goes, he gets really black and white about this.

You cannot stand still. You must either rise or fall. Rise higher or fall lower.

Now in this last week, it was a bit of a marker for me because it was 25 years ago this last week that I started ordained ministry. And as I look back at all the different people that I've met over the years in the years in different places from different ages and different walks of life, it breaks my heart that there's a pattern that I've noticed that repeats itself over and over again. And as I say, it's not confined to any particular background or to any particular age group, but I encountered it fairly early on when I first became a minister and have encountered it ever since.

And now I will get into a conversation and it will go something like this. Somebody will be saying to me, you know, I used to kind of get really excited about faith. And I remember when I first heard about Jesus and when I first started coming to church and it was great, but somehow I haven't got that spark anymore.

And it feels like things have just dried up. And I'm not really sure that church is relevant and I'm not sure that that that where I am with faith anymore.

[7 : 11] Now, I'm talking very broad brush terms, but in different forms, I've had those sorts of conversations over and over and over again. And the single unifying factor that I noticed over and over again is that when you begin to drill down into that person's story and that experience, it would seem that it comes down to one and the same thing, almost without exception, and it is this, that whether they were aware of it or not, but the understanding of their faith in Jesus seems to be such that it was confined to that moment of coming to him. To the point that it eclipsed the equally important theme that being a follower of Jesus is not just the initial coming to him, but it is a daily recognition that he is there and that as you set out with every day, yes, every day, whatever situation you are in, he is there for you, wanting you to know him more and to grow in that knowledge that he is there and that knowledge of his love and to know the reality, to grow and to keep on growing and to keep on growing.

And I think that that is what Wesley was getting at when he said, you cannot stand still. You can either rise or fall. If you have an idea that becoming a Christian is a static thing, then don't be surprised when your faith becomes static.

Tragically, we can have this idea of the Christian message of grace, of coming to Jesus, that is almost transactional. You give your life to Jesus and you get eternal life back and that's it.

Thank you, Jesus. I'll see you in heaven. There's that, the late Dallas Willard, who was a brilliant Christian philosopher who died not that long ago, a few years ago. He said this in his book called The Great Omission. He said, we have multitudes of professing Christians who may well be ready to die, but obviously are not ready to live.

See, being a follower of Jesus is not just about taking out an eternal insurance policy, but when eventually you depart from this mortal coil, then you're okay for eternity.

[9 : 52] It starts now. And that means that when you become a follower of Jesus, it's not just a waiting around, waiting for eternity to happen, but rather it really does begin now in a way that is, well, there's a suddenness about it, but there will be a gradual thing that doesn't stop in this life.

And that's why Christianity is not just a pie in the sky when you die thing. And it's not even, as somebody once put its steak on a plate while you wait. It's a living reality that is relevant to every single life situation you can possibly find yourself in. Why? Because Jesus is there in that situation saying, okay, so here we are. How are we going to face this then?

And as we face those decisions, how are you going to grow closer? Now that's exciting. That's really exciting. As John Mark Comer puts it in this book, which is in fact, in some ways, his book, Practising the Way, is nothing new. It's old truths, but they're just presented in a really fresh way, I think.

But I think as he rather brilliantly puts it, he says, salvation is less about getting you into heaven, and is more about getting heaven into you.

See, following Jesus is that eternal promise, but that eternal promise that you can live in the light of now, and that can live in you now. As far as I'm aware, as far as I can tell, nowhere, anywhere in the Gospels did Jesus ever talk about following him as a one-in-time thing. The Gospel was never presented as a thing that just happens once and then that's it.

[11 : 47] Rather, it was all about this theme of growing into the kingdom of God, of call to repentance, which means a turning around in a dynamic, not a static way, whereby we know him and we get to know him more and more and more and more, which is why he says, come, follow me.

Jesus never spoke about making converts, only ever about making disciples. What does it mean to be a follower, to be a disciple? Well, in Jesus' day and culture, to have followed him would have been like following a rabbi, a great religious teacher, a spiritual leader.

Of course, Jesus was so much more than just that. But, to our 21st century Western ears, perhaps the closest we can get to understanding that is the idea of being an apprentice.

You see, to be an apprentice means that you are following somebody oh so closely, that you do what they do, you learn from them, you listen so carefully to what they say, so that you would copy them and do the same things, and eventually become like them.

To be an apprentice is to strive to be able to do what the Master shows you. Now, every analogy eventually breaks down, but stay with me for this.

[13 : 26] That being a follower of Jesus is in many ways like being an apprentice. It's so much more than that. But it involves doing the things that Jesus did, learning more about how he does things, that we might copy him and become more like him.

And that's a lifelong process that never, ever stops. And over these next few weeks, we're going to be thinking a little bit about more what that means in practical terms. But what I want to do now is just come to the last part of that reading that Catherine read to us just now, because it really unpacks it in a very powerful way.

Philippians 2, just those last two verses, 12 and 13, where Paul writes, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose. It seems to me that in Philippians in general, and in those verses in particular, we have two things that are caught up there.

Firstly, Paul talks about working out your salvation. Salvation is something you've got to work out. Now notice he does not say you've got to work for your salvation.

[14 : 49] As he calls us here, as he rallies people to say, look guys, you've got to make some effort here to grow as Christians, effort does not mean earning. Quite clearly, Paul is not talking about that because throughout his entire message, throughout the whole of the New Testament, faith is, sorry, the gospel is presented as something that we don't have to earn God's favour, it's a given.

But nevertheless, we are called to work out. It's from that place of knowing knowing that God loves you unconditionally, he has accepted you and set you free and gifted you with eternal life and his presence now.

It is from that knowledge that we are called to work out with fear and trembling what it means to be a follower of Jesus. But secondly, equally important, that gift of salvation is precisely that.

It is 100% God's gift to you. Two stories, just to unpack those two things. The first one is this. Paul goes on to say in the following chapter of Philippians, he says, I press on towards the goal.

In other words, that call to work out salvation is like running a race. It's going to involve effort. In 1968, the Olympics took place in Mexico City.

[16 : 16] And John Stephen Aquari was a runner. He represented Tanzania in the marathon. Now, Aquari was an elite runner.

He'd won many marathons across Africa. But at Mexico City, in the Olympics, he encountered something that he hadn't encountered before.

And it was a massive altitude change. Such that, even though he easily qualified to run in the Olympics, midway through the race, he suffered extreme cramps.

And he eventually fell down, dislocating a knee. But Aquari wasn't to be beaten by this. He eventually got up and he limped his way through the second half of that marathon.

When he eventually got into the stadium, the stadium had virtually emptied of the crowds. There was just about 100 people there, apparently. But he came in around about an hour after the winner of the race.

[17 : 29] Afterwards, he was interviewed. And the person interviewing said to Aquari, why didn't you just give up when your knee seized up like that? And he said this, my country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race.

They sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race. Being a follower of Jesus means that we come to him. It might be suddenly, it might be gradually.

But Paul talks about it in terms of being a race not as something that we've got to somehow work really hard in order to earn our salvation, but rather because this message that death is defeated, that we are set free for all eternity, means that we can face the battles of everyday life now.

Expect it to be hard work and expect to have to make effort, but we do so knowing that God is there and that he set us free in order to run that race.

And the second story I want to share with you is just to illustrate actually that it is 100% God's gift to us in case we're tempted to think otherwise.

[18 : 39] Because notice that he says that Paul writes that, you know, it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fill his good purpose. There's a story, it's about this boy who went into a sweet shop one day and he went in with his mum.

She was buying a present for a cousin. So she went over to the other side of the shop and she was looking for something to buy and the boy was standing there at the counter and it was one of those old-fashioned sweet shops with the jars and the shopkeeper saw this boy just staring at this particular jar of sweets.

There was no one else around so he grabbed the shopkeeper, grabbed the jar down, took the lid off and held it out in front of the boy and he said, look, you can help yourself, you can have a handful of sweets.

The boy just stared back at him not quite knowing what to say. He said, no, go on, quick, before someone else comes in you can have a handful of sweets. Still the boy was frozen to the spot. He said, look, have a handful and the boy would do nothing so eventually the shopkeeper reached his hand into the jar, filled his hand with the sweets and gave them to the boy who put them in his pocket.

Well eventually him and his mum got out of the shop and they were standing outside and his mum who'd overheard all this, he said, why on earth did you not accept the handful of sweets when the shopkeeper offered it to you?

[20 : 04] He said, his hands were so much bigger than mine. It's not what we do, it's what God does.

That's the message that Paul is getting so excited and so passionate about as he writes to the Philippian people. When he says, run the race, but run the race and work out your salvation and make the effort not because you've got to somehow win that race because it's already been won for you and not because you've somehow got to earn salvation because it's already been given to you but because that is that precious, precious gift.

Know that it is yours. Own it with confidence. Grow in it and keep on growing. So as we start this series today and over these next few weeks we're going to be thinking more about what that means.

To grow and to keep on growing. We're going to pray now and as we come to pray let's just bring our own lives before God now and ask him wherever we are at however we feel about our own faith right now let's ask him to in a way that will probably be unique to each and every one of us in the room let's ask him to help us to grow.

Let's pray. Lord God each and every one of us will be at a different point in that journey of discipleship.

[21 : 49] It may be that we've not been Christians for long it might be that perhaps we haven't even made that decision for you yet or it might be that we've made that decision for you a long time ago it may be that we do feel that we're drying up spiritually or it might be that we feel really excited and are passionate about our faith and we're just poised and expectant to do the things that you want us to do but Lord whatever our experience is right now thank you that you know us even better than we know ourselves and so like Lord right now whatever is going on in our own lives meet us there Lord right now come Holy Spirit come Holy Spirit come Holy Spirit let's just take a moment just to wait on him

Lord whatever we might feel about you or think about you meet us in that place Lord we are sorry for the things that we have said or done or not said and done that has slowed down that that growth Lord we thank you that your message to us is consistent your message is that we are loved we are forgiven and that you want us to know that and to grow in that so Lord help us to grow Lord as we face whatever comes in this next week may we grow through each conversation each decision each set of circumstances that comes our way help us to be apprentices to you to grow and to keep on growing

Lord as we continue to worship you now move among us in your spirit in Jesus name Amen to the Lord I...