

Fan or Follower?

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[0 : 0 0] important statements that Jesus ever made. And of course what that means is that it's one of the most important things that you'll ever hear. Are we going to have that up?

Yep. Oh, there we go. So here we are. And I'm sure you've heard it before. And then he said to them all, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up the cross daily and follow me. I think those words quite literally have got life-changing implications for all of us. But you see, we won't understand the full implications of what Jesus is saying here until we understand who he's talking to. He isn't talking to the religious elite. He's not talking just to the priests and the Pharisees. He's not talking to people who have got it all together. He's not just talking to the rich and the powerful and the famous. If you look, you'll see who he's talking to. I'm going to call it the great invitation. And he says, whoever, whoever wants to be my disciple. And we need to get our mind around that simple word, whoever. It's an invitation to everyone. Did you notice that Jesus doesn't add any restrictions or small print? There's no special qualifications. That word, whoever, is an all-inclusive word. And whoever means you. And it means me. It means every single one of us here tonight who is allowed, who is invited to follow Jesus. Anyone. Quite literally anyone.

And of course, if you have read the Gospels, you know that Jesus meant this. Fishermen and violent terrorists, tax collectors and even betrayers, nit-picking religious keepers of rules and adulterers, religious officials and sex workers, intellectuals and beggars, rich, poor. And Jesus invited them all to follow him. And you know, nothing has changed. Whoever we are, whatever we've done, Jesus invites us to follow him. And whether because of what's happened in your life, you feel like a villain or a victim.

Whether you're upwardly mobile or feel like you're stuck in a dead-end job. Whether you've got a PhD or you left school with no qualifications. Whether you're a virgin or sexually promiscuous. Whether you're single, married, divorced or divorced again. Whether you're Scottish, African, Asian or English.

Whether you're a regular churchgoer or a backslider. Whether you're here tonight full of faith or full of doubt. Jesus really did mean it when he said whoever. Whoever you are. Whatever's happening in your life. Jesus invites you to follow him. And have you ever thought about the implications of that before? There is a sense in which Jesus believes in you before you believe in Jesus.

[3 : 3 0] Knowing everything that there is to know about you. All your faults, all your failings, all your achievements, all your gifts. Jesus says, I believe you can be my disciple.

I believe you can be my follower. So what does it mean to actually do that? To follow Jesus? What's that an invitation to? And that's what I'd like us to unpack tonight. I'm a great Scottish rugby fan. You probably see the worry lines on my face. I have my rugby shots. I even have my sign picture of Gavin Hastings up on my wall. I go to Murrayfield. I build out Flourer, Scotland, with the best of them. I trade the team on. But I'm a fan. I don't actually go on the pitch.

I don't play the game. I watch from a comfy seat. I don't break a sweat. And to be honest, if the ticket's too expensive or the weather's not looking great, I don't even go to the game.

And here's something that we all need to know. Jesus isn't looking for fans. He's looking for followers.

You see, there's a lot of people who follow Jesus when it's convenient and comfortable. They appreciate his teaching. They're impressed by the miracles.

[5 : 01] And they cheer him on from a safe distance in the church. And they want to use the name Christ and Christian without being committed to becoming more like him. And when Jesus says, follow him, he wants followers, not fans. He wants people who are willing to go all in when it comes to following him and deny themselves and take up the cross and follow him wherever it takes and wherever it leads. How many of you remember that American TV show, Myth Busters? Whether you'd look at a myth and show that it was wrong or right. You know, I reckon that there's a myth in the church that needs busting. You see, what I think's happened is that we've created a version of Christianity where people believe that you can be a Christian and yet refuse this invitation to follow Jesus wholeheartedly. And that's a myth that needs busting. And there are people in churches, I've been a pastor for nearly 30 years and I've met them, who think that following Jesus is a kind of optional extra to the

Christian life. And that's why we need to hear Jesus saying that this is for everyone. It's not just that everyone in school, the call to everyone is the same. Discipleship is entry level, not PhD level Christianity. Have you heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer? He's one of my heroes.

Bonhoeffer was an American pastor. He was murdered by the Nazis for taking a stand against him. And he wrote probably one of the greatest books about discipleship and it's called The Cost of Discipleship.

If you've not read it, you really should. And in that book, he's talking about this myth that you can be a Christian and not a disciple. That you can come to church but not be committed to following Jesus in your life. And he called that idea, the myth that we are talking about, he called it cheap grace. And he said that on the one hand it's all about grace and it costs us nothing. And yet on the other hand it's about disciples to give everything. And he said this, cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. Baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Absolution without personal confession. And here's the killer life. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate. And so there isn't this kind of elite group of Christians who are called to follow him and are disciples. And there's another group of Christians where they just kind of amble along. Jesus doesn't meet that distinction. And he wants you to know that tonight. Jesus looked over those crowds 2,000 years ago and he looks over us tonight and he says, whoever. Whoever you are, come and follow me. That's why the gospel is good news.

Whatever our flaws, whatever our doubts, whatever imperfections that we have, he still comes and says, you can follow me. You just have to say yes to an invitation. But here he reminds us that saying yes has implications. Jesus warns potential disciples time and time again in the gospels that you need to count the cost. And Jesus has never watered down his message to attract more people.

[9 : 06] He was up front, said there's going to be a cost. In the next few words, he begins to spell out what that cross is. And if we were talking earlier about the great invitation, maybe now we need to think about the great cost. Because Jesus says, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up the cross daily and follow me. And this is where the rubber hits the road. Jesus isn't wanting us to be passive fans. He invites us here in these words to be fully committed followers. And that requires a response on your part. And a response that Jesus says is going to come with a cost. He said we must deny ourselves. And you know, we live in a culture that constantly screams at us in different ways.

Please yourself. Do what makes you happy. Do whatever it is that brings fulfillment to your life. We're told life is about pursuing our own desires and our own goals and our own comfort.

And Jesus comes and he turns it all upside down. And following Jesus sometimes means we need to deny ourselves. Quite literally, there are times following Jesus means that we have to say no to ourselves.

Be a disciple of Jesus will mean choosing his will over your will, his desire over your desire, his plans over your plans. And then he says, take up your cross.

And if there was ever a call to give everything and a life of total surrender, it's contained in that phrase. To take up your cross. It means dying to a life where we're in control. It means taking up the cross knowing that there'll be hardship. There'll be moments when we follow Jesus when it's going to be hard and it'll cost you something. It might cost you comfort or reputation or security or your own preferences. And so there is a cost in following Jesus. But here's what I want to tell you, the cost of not following Jesus is even higher. One of my favorite spiritual writers is a man called Dallas Willard.

[11 : 38] And he believed everything we've just talked about. He agreed with Bonhoeffer. In fact, he wrote a book called The Great Omission from the Great Commission, thinking about discipleship and its importance.

But Dallas Willard wanted to say that as well as recognizing the cost of discipleship, it's equally important that you recognize the cost of non-discipleship. And I love what he said.

He said, non-discipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated through out by faith, by love and faith. It sees everything in the light of God. God's overriding governance for good, the hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what's right. In short, non-discipleship costs you exactly the abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring. Just think about that for a moment. Non-discipleship costs you exactly the abundance of life that Jesus came to bring.

And yes, following Jesus will cost. It will require picking up the cross. It will mean denying yourself sacrifice and commitment. But you know, if we choose not to follow Jesus, we miss out on the very abundant life that he said he came to bring us. We miss out on his purpose and his joy and the deep satisfaction that comes from knowing that we are living in the kingdom of God. Because you see, the cost of non-discipleship is a life lived apart from God's will and out of God's will. And that ultimately will always lead to emptiness. And I wonder sometimes if that is why we have so many joyless, half-hearted, half-committed churchgoers. Because they're paying the price of non-discipleship. And so we've thought about this great invitation to whoever we are. And you've thought about the fact it's got a great cost.

And yet there is a greater cost in not paying it. And lastly, Jesus lays down a great challenge to every one of us. How does this work practically? We've got to take up the cross daily. Every day we have to wake up and say, Lord, today it's about you and not about me. And no one becomes a Christian by accident of a good attendance at church or good. We are born again and put our faith in Christ.

[14 : 29] So there is a moment when we move in and step into the Christian life where we trust in everything that he's done for us through his life, death, and resurrection. But you know, here's the problem.

Sometimes that we think the start of the Christian life is all there is in the Christian life. Do you remember if you got married the day you got married? You made a big decision, a new life, a married life started then. But every single day afterwards, you have to live out that decision.

And it's the same with the Christian life. We make a decision, we enter the kingdom of God, and then every single day we need to live out the implications of that decision. And every day presents new challenges and new temptations and new opportunities to either deny yourself and follow him or to slip back into a fan-like following. Discipleship is a 24-7 lifestyle. And following Jesus is expressed in your everyday life, every day. So how do we do that? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus in 2024? I've been thinking a lot about that. And I think as we look at the Gospels, we could say that there's three things that disciples do daily. Being with Jesus, becoming like Jesus, and doing what Jesus did. And so the invitation is to daily be with Jesus. Because you see, Christianity, discipleship is fundamentally a relationship. We are following a person. It's relational.

And it's spending time with him. Jesus said that we are to abide with him. We have to be in his presence. There are to be times every day that we simply set aside to be with Christ. So let me ask you, daily, last week, how did you do with just being with Jesus? How much time did you set aside to be with him? And then the other things that disciples did daily was to become like Jesus daily? You see, down 2,000 years, followers of Jesus have discovered that the more time you spend with Jesus, the more you become like Jesus. And as we spend time with him, we take on his values and his ways.

Because you see, Jesus isn't just for superficial change. He's interested in inner engineering. The transformation of our heart inwardly so we reflect him in our words and our actions outwardly.

[17 : 32] So we respond to the challenges of life with his love and his humility and his grace. We become committed to his kingdom in all that we do.

And then we do what Jesus did daily. Jesus didn't just preach some stuff about the kingdom of God. He lived it out. Every day he lived out the kingdom of God.

And empowered by his spirit, he invites us to bring his love, his healing, his justice to a hurting world. To be his hands and feet.

And so if you want to follow Jesus daily and take up your cross, it's going to mean being with Jesus daily. It's going to mean a commitment to becoming more like him and doing what Jesus did daily.

I want to read to you something else that Dallas Willard wrote. It said, The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those of us who claim to be Christians will become disciples, students, apprentices, practitioners of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live out the kingdom of heaven into every corner of human existence.

[19 : 06] Can I tell you that that's the greatest issue that you face as a church? Will you become disciples? Can I tell you that that's the greatest issue that you face as an individual?

Will you be a disciple? This is the greatest issue facing us tonight. And so there's an unavoidable question that comes from what Jesus says to us tonight.

Are we a fan or a follower? Fans love Jesus when it's convenient and comfortable. Fans are there for the miracles and the excitement and the feel-good moments and the spiritual highs.

But when the road gets tough, you have to deny yourself and there's a cross to be picked up. You're quick to stop following. Jesus calls us to be followers.

He's calling you to go all in every day. A daily death. A life fully surrendered no matter the cost. And yes, Bonhoeffer is right.

[20 : 10] We don't want cheap grace. Yet Dallas Willard is also right. That the cost of not following Jesus is far greater.

And so tonight, Jesus extends to you, for he's extended to every generation of believers, this great invitation. Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and pick up the cross daily and follow me.

That's his invitation to you tonight. Will you be a fan? A follower? For some of us, that might mean starting, following him for the first time.

For some of us, maybe we realize that we've become more of a fan than a follower, and it's about reorientating our life around him again and following him consistently.

And I want us just to listen to a song. And as you listen to these words, I want you to ask yourself if they had echoed honestly in your heart.

[21 : 23] Over the last month, could you sing this song honestly and authentically after the way that you've lived over the last month? Let's listen to it now.

Thank you.

I have decided to follow Jesus.

I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus.

No turning back. No turning back. Thank you.

[22 : 49] You are right. Thank you.

Though none go with me, still I will follow. No turning back, no turning back.

No turning back, no turning back. No turning back, no turning back.

No turning back, no turning back. No turning back, no turning back.

No turning back, no turning back. I have decided to follow Jesus.

[24 : 36] I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus.

No turning back, no turning back. No turning back, no turning back.

No turning back, no turning back. No turning back, no turning back.

No turning back. No turning back, no turning back.

I want to end by praying a prayer that I feel I need to pray.

[25 : 39] And maybe if you felt Jesus speaking to you tonight, you could pray this along with me.

Like prayer. Like prayer. Lord Jesus, I come before you now. I have a heart that longs to follow you.

I have heard your invitation to deny myself and take up my cross daily and follow you. And Lord, I confess that this is not always easy. My heart is often pulled towards comfort and control and self-centeredness, but now I choose to surrender all that I am to you.

Help me to deny myself. To set aside my own will, my own plans and my own desires so that I can make room for yours. Teach me to put you first in everything that I do.

To seek your kingdom above my own ambitions. To trust in your plans even when I don't understand them. And Lord, I also commit to taking up my cross each day.

[26 : 49] I know that following you will at times mean sacrifice and discomfort and sometimes suffering. But I believe that you're with me in every trial.

Give me the strength and grace to carry the cross you have given me. Knowing that it is in this surrender that I will find true life in you. Finally, Lord, help me, empower me by your spirit to follow you wholeheartedly.

Guide my steps, lead me where you want me to go and transform my heart to reflect yours. May I live each day in obedience to you, trusting in your goodness and walking in the path you've set before me.

Here and now, I commit my life to you, Jesus. Let me be a follower, not just a fan. Shape me into your disciple for your glory and for the sake of your kingdom.

In your precious name, I pray. Amen. Amen. And I'm going to invite musicians to come and lead us in a final song. Thank you.

[27 : 54] Father. Amen. Amen. Amen. Everyone. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Any thanks, I pray for you to ■er makes your actions. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. And for once, I pray for you all to join us. Amen.

Amen. Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. He is my light, my strength, my soul This cornerstone, this solid ground Turned through the fiercest drought and storm What heights of love, what depths of peace Where fears are still, where strivings cease My comforter, my all in all Here in the love of Christ I stand In Christ alone, good to confess Fullness of God in heaven Whose pain, this gift of love and righteousness

Starned by the ones He came to save Till on that cross, as Jesus died The wrath of God was satisfied For every sin on Him was laid Here in the death of Christ I live There in the ground His body lay Light of the world by darkness slain Then bursting forth a glorious day Up from the grave He rose again And as He stands in victory Since curse has lost its grip on me

For I am His and He is mine But with the precious blood of Christ No guilt in life, no fear in death This is the power of Christ in me From life's heart's cry From life's earth cry to final breath Jesus commands my destiny No power of hell, no scheme of man Can ever pluck me from His hand Till He returns Till He returns And cause me all Here in the power of Christ I stand What that song makes me a little bit homesick for Switzerland

[31 : 33] Because believe it or not, that song was first sung in the church I pastored in Switzerland The Gettys were having a sabbatical, we can worship there So it always reminds me of back there And talking of reminding of things Sometimes I preach on a Sunday And by Wednesday, everything that's happened Crowds out what I was thinking about on Sunday And so I started a little habit that I thought I'd share with other people as well And I write a little devotional on what we think about on Sunday It's just a point to ponder An action point, something to do And something to pray about And we've got some of them at the back And if you'd like to be thinking out daily What we've been thinking about tonight Then you could take one of those away And just ponder it during the week And think about what God's been speaking to us about And how we work that out So let's pray Father, we're going to face challenges And opportunities And temptations

Keep us following behind you Step by step this week And now May the love of God And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit Surround you And be with you And fill you And go with you Amen Amen Rebekah Who's After Us nochmal W Agely