

Practicing the Way—

Apprentice to Jesus

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Imagine this: Your name is Simon. You're a first-century Hebrew, likely in your late teens or early twenties. You run a fishing business in the Galilee, a string of villages in the north of Israel. Your life is pretty much mapped out for you. You do what your father did, and his father before him. Living under Roman occupation, there aren't a lot of options. Keep your head down, be quiet, pay your taxes.

One day you're waist deep in water, casting your net alongside your brother, Andrew, when you notice a man walking toward you on the beach. You instantly recognize his face. It's him: *Jesus*, from Nazareth, just a few miles away. Everyone is talking about this man—he is saying and doing things no rabbi has said or done. Ever.

Here he is, walking straight toward you. You make eye contact. His eyes sparkle like stars, like there's a cosmos behind them. He radiates joy, but there's no small talk:

Come, follow me...and I will send you out to fish for people.^[1]

You're absolutely stunned.

It can't be.

Not *you*.

You immediately drop your nets, drag Andrew out of the boat (though he doesn't need any coaxing), leave *everything* behind, and fall in step behind Jesus, elated to be in his company. Or in the words of the biographer Mark, "At once they left their nets and followed him."^[2]

Now, if you're familiar with this story, it's easy to miss how bizarre it is. What would make Simon literally walk away from a profitable business and leave behind his family and friends, with zero planning, all to follow a man with no income stream, no organization, and no official position into an unknown future? Is this drinking the Kool-Aid before there was Kool-Aid?

Or are we missing something?

Jesus was a rabbi

If you were Simon, and Jesus were to visit your synagogue one fine Sabbath morning to preach, the category you likely would have put him in was that of a rabbi, or teacher.

The title *rabbi* literally means "master."^[3] Rabbis were the spiritual masters of Israel. Not only were they expert teachers of the Torah (the Scriptures of their day); they were also magnetic examples of life with God—those special few who shine with an inner luminescence.

Every rabbi had his “yoke”—a Hebrew idiom for his set of teachings, his way of reading Scripture, his take on how to thrive as a human being in God’s good world. How you, too, could taste a little of what they’d tasted...

Rabbis came from a broad cross section of society. They could have been farmers or blacksmiths or even carpenters.^[4] Most trained under another rabbi for many years, then began to teach and call their own disciples around the age of thirty. But there was no formal certification like in our modern educational system. Authority worked differently. Your *life* and *teaching* were your credentials.

Rabbis were itinerant, and most were unpaid. (Some worked their farms or ran businesses for seasons of the year, then traveled in the off-season.) They walked from town to town to teach in whatever synagogue would have them, relying on the hospitality of people of peace. They often spoke in parables and riddles. Normally, they traveled with a small band of disciples, teaching not in a classroom but in the open air and along the road—not from a textbook or curriculum but from the Torah and the school of life.^[5]

Over and over again in the four Gospels, Jesus is addressed as “rabbi.”^[6]

But he was no ordinary rabbi.^[7]

Everywhere he went, the crowds were “astonished” and “overwhelmed with wonder.”^[8] The biographer Luke wrote, “All

spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.”^[9] Mark said, “The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.”^[10] They gave feedback like “Where did this man get this wisdom...?” and even “No one ever spoke the way this man does.”^[11]

Of course, saying that Jesus was a rabbi is about as insightful as saying that he was Jewish (although that’s another truth copious numbers of people forget). But sadly, very few people—including many Christians—take Jesus seriously as a spiritual teacher.

To some, he’s a wraithlike apparition, there to inspire later generations to a fuzzy kind of goodwill. To others, he is a social revolutionary—RESIST!—fist up to the Roman Empire then and all empires now. To a large number of Western Christians, he is a delivery mechanism for a particular theory of atonement, as if the only reason he came was to die, not to live.

As a result, many Christians don’t consider Jesus all that smart. Holy, sure. Kind, yes. Even divine. But intelligent? Not really.

An increasing number of Christians don’t agree with him on crucial matters of human flourishing. They would rather trust a politician, celebrity, or pastor gone rogue than Jesus the teacher and the disciples who studied directly under him. They would never even think to consult Jesus on the pressing matters of our time: politics, racial justice, sexuality, gender, mental health, and so on. As Dallas Willard said, “What lies at the heart of the

astonishing disregard of Jesus found in the moment-to-moment existence of multitudes of professing Christians is a simple *lack of respect for him.*"^[12]

This is vital, because if to “follow” Jesus is to trust him to lead you to the life you desire, it’s very hard (if not *impossible*) to entrust your life to someone you don’t respect.

But what if Jesus was more intelligent than any other teacher in history? More than Stephen Hawking or Karl Marx or even the Buddha? What if he was a brilliant sage with insight into the human condition that is still, two millennia later, without parallel? What if he simply has no equal or peer?

Now, *that* could be someone to put your trust in.

Of course, to call Jesus a brilliant rabbi is not to say he was *just* a brilliant rabbi. The sign hanging above Jesus’ head when he was crucified said KING OF THE JEWS, not GURU. It tells you a lot about Jesus that his enemies perceived him as a political threat.

This would have made perfect sense in Jesus’ culture. Moses, the great historical luminary of the Jewish people, was called Moshe Rabbenu (“Moses Our Rabbi”) and Israel’s Great Teacher. First-century Israelites were waiting for a *new* Moses to appear and lead a *new* exodus out of the Roman Empire—a figure they began to call the Messiah. Some expected the long-awaited Messiah to appear as a warrior or military leader, but many expected him to come as a great teacher. As two scholars put it, “The Jewish people believed that becoming a great scholar of the Scriptures

represented life's supreme achievement. In such a culture, it made sense that the Messiah should be the greatest of teachers. No wonder Jesus became a Jewish rabbi."^[13]

But we Christians believe he was even *more* than the Messiah. Jesus made claims that no Jewish king would ever dare utter—claims that got him accused of blasphemy, a capital offense in his world. As one of his critics put it, “We are not stoning you for any good work...but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”^[14]

But to say Jesus was *more* than just a rabbi or even the Messiah is not to say he was anything *less* than a brilliant, provocative, wise, spiritual master of how to live and thrive in this our Father's world.

He was a rabbi. And like most rabbis of his day, Jesus had disciples...

Three goals of an apprentice

Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus did not invent discipleship. Rabbis with a small coterie of disciples were regularly seen walking around Galilee. Just a few years before Jesus, Rabbi Hillel called eighty disciples. Rabbi Akiva—a famous teacher a few decades after Jesus—had only five, but thousands were said to “follow” him around Israel. In the New Testament itself, John the Baptizer had disciples, as did the Pharisees; the apostle Paul was formerly a disciple of a nationally known rabbi named Gamaliel. Discipleship (or, as I'm about to relabel it, apprenticeship) was

the pinnacle of the first-century Jewish educational system, much like a PhD or graduate program is in our system today.

That means to understand discipleship, we first must understand the Jewish educational system. (Don't worry; I promise to keep this short.)

Jewish kids started school around five years old at the local *bet sefer* ("the house of the book"), which was the equivalent of elementary school. Normally the *bet sefer* was built onto the side of the synagogue and run by a full-time scribe or teacher. The curriculum was the Torah, and in an oral culture, by the age twelve or thirteen, most kids would have the *entire* Torah—*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*—memorized. At that point, the vast majority of students went home. They would apprentice in the family business or help run the farm.

But the best and brightest would go on to a second level of education, called *bet midrash* ("the house of learning"), where they would continue their studies. By the age of seventeen, they would have memorized—wait for it—*the entire Old Testament*.^[15]

Now, at this point, the overwhelming majority were done and were basically told to "go make babies, pray that they become rabbis, and ply your trade."^[16] But the best of the best of *the best* would apply to apprentice under a rabbi. Now, this was *really* hard to get into. Apprenticeship programs were the equivalent of the Ivy League today but even more exclusive. You had to find a rabbi whose yoke you were drawn to and then beg to join his band of students. The rabbi would grill you: "How well do

you know the Torah?” “What’s your take on the Nephilim in Genesis 6?” “Do you side with Hillel or Shammai on Deuteronomy 24?” “Tell me, how often do you pray?”

And *if* he thought you had the smarts, the work ethic, and the chutzpah to one day become a rabbi yourself, he would say something like “Come, follow me.”^[17] Or another way to translate that is “Come, apprentice under me.”

Now, let’s say you were one of the lucky few who became an apprentice to a rabbi. From that day on, your entire life was organized around three driving goals:

1. To be with your rabbi

Jesus himself invited his disciples to “be with him.”^[18]

You would leave your family, your village, your trade, and follow your rabbi *twenty-four seven*. You were a student, but class wasn’t MWF from 11–11:50am. “Class” was *life*. You would spend every waking moment with your rabbi—sleeping at his side, eating at his table, sitting at his feet—and end up, after long hours walking behind him from town to town, covered in his dust.

All. Day. Every. Day.

2. To become like your rabbi

Jesus had this great line about how “the apprentice is not above the rabbi, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their rabbi.”^[19]

That was the heart and soul of apprenticeship—being with your master *for the purpose of becoming like your master*. You would copy his tone of voice, his mannerisms, his figures of speech. You wanted to be him.

Finally, your goal was...

3. To do as your rabbi did

The whole point of apprenticeship was to train under a rabbi in order to one day become a rabbi yourself. If you made it through the gauntlet of discipleship (and that was a real *if*), then, when he thought you were ready, your rabbi would turn to you and say something like “Okay, kid, I give you my blessing. Go, and make disciples.”

This was what it meant to be a disciple.

This is *still* what it means to be a disciple.

The problem is, this is *not* what most Christians mean by *discipleship* today. (Keep reading.) Yet when you look at Jesus’ model, whether in first-century Israel or twenty-first-century America, or wherever you’re reading this, the meaning of *discipleship* is perfectly clear: To follow Jesus is to become his apprentice. It’s to organize your entire life around three driving goals:

1. Be with Jesus.
2. Become like him.
3. Do as he did.

Apprenticeship to Jesus—that is, following Jesus—is a *whole*-life process of being with Jesus for the purpose of becoming like him and carrying on his work in the world. It’s a lifelong journey in which we gradually learn to say and do the kinds of things Jesus said and did as we apprentice under him in every facet of our lives.

Put another way, *disciple* is a noun.

Disciple is a noun, not a verb

The problem with the word *disciple* is that we don’t use it much outside church circles. The Hebrew word is *talmid*, and it simply means “a student of a teacher or philosopher”—not just a learner but a practitioner of an embodied way of life, one who is diligently working to be with and become like their master.^[20]

I would argue that the best word for translating *talmid* into English is the one I’ve been using for the last few pages: *apprentice*. This is *such* a helpful word. It conjures up a mode of education that is intentional, embodied, relational, and practice based—a type of learning that is totally different than what I grew up with.

Jesus' model of apprenticeship was a far cry from our Western educational system. As one pair of scholars put it, "Learning wasn't so much about retaining data as it was about gaining essential wisdom for living, absorbing it from those around him. This was...the ancient method whereby rabbis trained their *talmidim*, or disciples."^[21] To follow Jesus, then, meant to walk alongside him in a posture of listening, learning, observation, obedience, and imitation.^[22] For Jesus' first apprentices, the goal wasn't to pass a test, get a degree, or receive a certificate to frame on your office wall; it was to master the art of living in God's good world by learning from Jesus how to make steady progress into the kingdom of God. It was less like learning chemistry and more like learning jujitsu.

But whatever translation you adopt—disciple, apprentice, practitioner, student, follower—let me state the obvious: *Talmid* is a *noun*, not a verb.^[23]

People regularly ask me, "Who are you discipling?" or "Who disciplined you?" But as far as I can tell, not one time in the entire New Testament is *disciple* used as a verb. Not once.^[24] Grammatically speaking, then, to use *disciple* as a verb is bad form.

Case in point: just attempt to use any of its synonyms as a verb...

Christian: "Who are you Christian-ing?"

Wait, what? Christian isn't something you *do*; it's someone you *are*.

Believer: "Who are you believer-ing?"

Help me out here, I don't get it. Do you believe (trust in Jesus) or not?

Follower: "Who are you follower-ing?"

I'm so confused: You either follow Jesus or you don't.

People have come to me actually *bitter* because their former pastors "did not disciple" them. What they usually mean is that these pastors didn't spend one-on-one time with them. While I'm *all for* pastors giving their time to foster people's growth in Jesus, I would argue that you can't "disciple" somebody any more than you can "Christian" them, "believer-er" them, or "follower-er" them.

Please hear me: This is *not* just semantics. Language matters.

Here's why: If *disciple* is something that is done *to* you (a verb),^{[\[25\]](#)} then that puts the onus of responsibility for your spiritual formation on *someone else*, like your pastor, church, or mentor. But if *disciple* is a *noun*—if it's someone you *are* or are not—then no one can "disciple" you but Rabbi Jesus himself.

You must choose to accept Jesus' invitation to a life of apprenticeship.

If you choose to enroll as his student (and I very much hope you do), that means when you wake up tomorrow morning, your *entire* life is architected to this threefold aim: to be with Jesus, to become like him, and to do as he did. This is *the* animating

passion of your existence. “The rest are just details,” as Einstein said.

Tragically, this is not the same thing as being a Christian.

Are you a Christian or an apprentice?

The word *Christian* is used only three times in the New Testament.

To put that in perspective, the word *disciple* (or *apprentice*) is used 269 times, which comes as no surprise since the New Testament was written *by* apprentices of Jesus, *for* apprentices of Jesus. [\[26\]](#)

Just to make it crystal clear...

Christian: 3x

Apprentice: 269x

The word *Christian* literally means “little Christ” (or “mini Messiah”), which is beautiful. It was originally used as a religious epithet to mock followers of the Way. But over time, our spiritual ancestors embraced the slur and used it to self-identify as those devoted to the imitation of Christ. Goal #2: become like Jesus. All good.

Here’s the problem: That is *no longer* what the word conveys to many people today. To many in the West, a Christian is just someone who mentally ascribes to the bare bones of *Christianity*

(a word never used in Scripture) and may or may not occasionally attend church.

In Michael Burkholder's book *Lincoln's Christianity*, he wrote about the long-running debate over whether President Lincoln was a Christian. (The spiritual writer John Ortberg referenced this and noted how Lincoln has become a kind of Rorschach test that says more about what *we* believe than what he believed.^[27] Touché.) Burkholder said that before you can decide about Lincoln's Christianity, you must first confront "the essential question of what it means to be a Christian." He went on to define a Christian as one who believes that "Jesus Christ was divine and part of a Trinity, that Christ died for the sins of the world, and that faith in this doctrine is necessary for one to gain salvation"; and then said, this "is a foundation almost all are familiar with."^[28]

Now, I believe all of the above, as do pretty much all followers of Jesus everywhere. But what's striking about this "foundation" that "almost all are familiar with" is that it includes *absolutely nothing about following Jesus and intending to obey him*.

Hence the rub.

The thing is, the label *Christian* is one Jesus never used. He said, "Whoever wants to be my *apprentice...*" not "Whoever wants to put your hand up to become a Christian..."

Now, stay with me; happy thoughts are coming soon. Let's frame this problem as it pertains to my country, the United States of

America.^[29] Around 63 percent of Americans self-identify as Christians, though this number continues to decline.^[30] Trying to measure a person's level of spirituality is tricky, but quite a few surveys put the number of Americans who are following Jesus at around 4 percent.^[31] So...

Christians: 63 percent

Apprentices: 4 percent

My Catholic friends distinguish between Catholics and “practicing Catholics.” The former is more of a cultural or ethnic category, akin to being from Italy or Boston, and the latter is a measure of spiritual devotion.

Could it be time for Protestants to lovingly delineate between Christians and “practicing Christians”? As Saint Maximus said in the seventh century, a time not all that different from our own, “A person who is simply a man of faith is [not] a disciple.”^[32]

If an apprentice is simply anyone whose ultimate aim is to be with Jesus in order to become like him and live the way Jesus would live if he were in their shoes, then a *non*-apprentice (whether they identify as an atheist, a devotee of another religion, or even as a Christian) is simply anyone whose ultimate aim in life is *anything else*.

The problem is, in the West, we have created a cultural milieu *where you can be a Christian but not an apprentice of Jesus*.

Much preaching of the gospel today does not call people to a life of discipleship. Following Jesus is seen as *optional*—a post-

conversion “second track” for those who want to go further. Tragically, this has created a two-tier church, where a large swath of people who believe in God and even regularly attend church have not re-architected their daily lives on the foundation of apprenticeship to Jesus.^[33]

This is an alien idea in the writings of the New Testament. For example, in the literary design of the Gospels, you have two recurring groups: the apprentices and the crowds.^[34] The apprentices included all Jesus’ followers—the twelve apostles, but also many others, including women. The crowds were simply everyone *else*. There is no third category of “Christians” who generally agree with most of what Jesus was saying but don’t follow him or make a serious attempt to obey his teachings (but it’s all good ’cause they will “go to heaven when they die”).

This sharp divide between the apprentices and the crowds is a rhetorical device used by all four of Jesus’ biographers. The ambiguity of the term *crowds* is intentional. It’s a way of saying to the reader, “Which group are you in?”

Are you a face in the crowd?

Or an apprentice of Jesus?

Two millennia later, *especially* in the West, this question is more important than ever. I’ve been saving this Dallas Willard quote for pages...

The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who...

are identified as “Christians” will become *disciples*—students, apprentices, practitioners—*of Jesus Christ*, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence.^[35]

I could not agree more: *The greatest issue facing the world today* is not climate change, surveillance capitalism, human rights, or the specter of nuclear war, as utterly crucial as all these are. But can you imagine how many of those problems would effectively be solved overnight if the *billions* of living humans who identify as Christians all became apprentices of Jesus? If their driving aim was to approach every challenge as Jesus would?

You see, Jesus is not looking for converts to Christianity; he’s looking for apprentices in the kingdom of God.

But what are we saved to?

I came of age at a fascinating time in the history of the North American church. Every year, more than a million millennials walk away from the faith. And of the millennials who grew up in evangelical churches (like myself), only 10 percent qualify as what the Barna Group has labeled “resilient disciples”—which, sadly, does not mean they are the next Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King Jr.; it just means they are basic followers of Jesus.^[36]

Friends, 10 percent is a serious problem.

But what if this crisis of discipleship is a *feature* of evangelicalism, not a bug? What if it's *exactly what we should expect* based on how many people understand the gospel itself?^[37]

Short history tour: From at least World War II on, in many circles, the gospel was preached in such a way that a person could become a Christian without becoming an apprentice of Jesus. As I said, discipleship was optional—something to consider later if one were into that sort of thing. Many “converts” then felt that evangelism was a bait and switch: You come for the “free gift” of eternal life, raise your hand and pray the prayer, but then you are told to “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.” The problem is, *that's not what people signed up for*.

This split between evangelism and discipleship is still dominant in a large swath of Western churches.

Why am I saying this? Because how you understand the gospel is the linchpin of how you approach (or don't approach) discipleship. “Saying yes to Jesus” does not an apprentice make.

This raises questions about the nature of salvation itself: What exactly are we saved *to*? To even *ask* this question is tantamount to heresy in many streams of the church, but it must be done. Because if we get the gospel wrong, we get discipleship wrong—or we don't get it at all.

Full disclosure: The following is a caricature designed to sharpen my point,^[38] but this is the “gospel” as it is presented in many circles...

You are a sinner going to hell.

God loves you.

Jesus died on the cross for your sins.

If you believe in him, you can go to heaven when you die.^[39]

Now, much could be said about this “gospel”—namely, that it doesn’t sound anything at all like the gospel Jesus himself preached. (Keep reading...) Yet everything in it is “biblical,” although in desperate need of nuance. I believe it. The problem is not that it’s untrue but that it’s *missing* whole pieces of truth that are really, really important. It simply does not come close to the full picture of salvation we find in Jesus’ preaching or the writings of the New Testament. And it has created a kind of salvation by “minimum entrance requirements.”^[40]

As you would imagine, there are serious problems with this view of salvation.

There is no guarantee that you *can* be a Christian but not an apprentice of Jesus and still “go to heaven when you die.” Jesus warned us, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”^[41]

Even if you can (and I’m nothing but hopeful when it comes to the mercy of God), you remain trapped in a self-defeating cycle of sin and shame. And you never experience the life with God

and formation into a person of love that we all ache for in the marrow of our bones.

Much has been said in the Western church about the forgiveness of sins, which is good. Sin, as we'll explore in the pages to come, is *the* major obstacle on the path to becoming a person of love. But what is sin? We're regularly told that the word *sin* (*hamartia* in Greek) means "to miss the mark."^[42] True. But this begs the question, What is *the mark*?

Is it moral perfection? Is it a full ledger before the court of heaven? Is it not breaking any of the commands laid down in the Bible?

What if the mark is union with God?

What if it's the healing of your soul through participation in the inner life of the Trinity?

What if it's adoption into the Father's new multiethnic family through the saving work of his Son, Jesus?

What if it's becoming the kind of person who is so pervaded by love, wisdom, and strength that we have developed the capacity to eventually rule with Jesus over the cosmos itself?

If so, this gospel is an inadequate foundation on which to build a life of apprenticeship that is conducive to deep inner healing and overall transformation of body and soul.

And there it is—the fatal flaw: This version of the gospel *has* no call to apprentice yourself to Jesus. It normally requires you to say a one-time prayer, believe a set of doctrines about God, and attend church, thereby ensuring you go to heaven when you die. But in a bizarre twist, it does not necessarily require a life of apprenticeship to Jesus in the here and now.

When Jesus said he “came to seek and to save the lost,”^[43] is this the salvation he had in mind? A cursory reading of the Gospels would indicate we’re wildly underestimating all that Jesus intends for us...

For Jesus, salvation is less about getting *you into heaven* and more about getting *heaven into you*.

It’s not just about *him* becoming like *us* but also about *us* becoming like *him*.

It’s less of a *transaction* and more of a *transformation*.

It’s not just about what he has done *for* us but also about what he has done, is doing, and will do *in* us if we apprentice under him.

It’s about being a person who not only is loved *by* God but also is pervaded by the love *of* God.

It’s not just accepting the merit of his *death* but also receiving the power of his *resurrection*.

And it's not just about you and me as *individuals* but also about the formation of a whole new humanity and the healing of *the cosmos itself*.

But, again, the main problem with this “gospel” is that it simply *does not sound anything like the gospel Jesus preached*.

Listen to Mark's summary of Jesus' gospel:

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”^[44]

Jesus' gospel was that Israel's long story had reached its climax in him—that he had come to reunite heaven and earth and usher in the kingdom of God, a God-saturated society of peace and justice and love. Jesus' central message was that this in-breaking kingdom is available *now*, to all. That *anyone*, no matter who you are, where you come from, or what your station in life is, can enter this kingdom and be “blessed” (or “happy”) with God. You can have this new kind of life if you will put your trust and confidence in Jesus for the whole of your life.

Is this how you understand the gospel?

In Jesus' gospel, the call to become an apprentice makes perfect sense. If the kingdom of God is “near” but is not a kingdom with borders and passports—in fact, it's been “hidden...from the wise and learned”^[45]—then it makes sense that we'd need some serious training in *how* to access this extraordinary new society and enter the inner life of God that's been made available to us through Jesus. We'd need access to a new power to break

off our old life habits (that belong to the kingdom of this world) and become who we were always meant to be: people of the new kingdom. We'd want to learn from the absolute best—Jesus himself. In short, we'd want to become his apprentices.

One way to judge the veracity of your gospel is by this simple acid test: Would someone hearing your gospel naturally conclude that apprenticeship to Jesus is the only fitting response?

Much has been said about the rise of consumer Christianity in recent decades, but much *less* has been said about its possible connection to the way the gospel has been preached. The relationship of some Western Christians to the gospel is passive. We are often told, "It's not about what you do; it's about what Jesus *has done for you*." But that's a false dichotomy, and that language is never used by *any* of the New Testament writers. It seems the Western church has at times been more careful to avoid "works righteousness" than to avoid sin.

Don't get me wrong; the Gospels are full of story after story of *compassion*. In Jesus' parables, we're the servant whose debt of billions is forgiven by the king, the prodigal who is welcomed home with a feast after we've squandered our father's inheritance, and the beggar outside the gate who is seated at Abraham's table as the guest of honor. It's always been grace, pure grace.

But Jesus didn't go around beating up on self-effort. As the saying goes, "Grace is not opposed to *effort*, it is opposed to *earning*."^[46] Don't conflate the two.

Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount with this famous climax:

Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice [note his word choice: *practice*] is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.^[47]

Can you imagine Jesus, to stave off any soteriological anxiety, immediately adding, “But don’t worry. I’m about to do it all for you. You don’t need to do a thing, because that would be works-based righteousness and it’s bad”?

It’s unimaginable that Jesus would ever say something like that.

Sadly, this tragic misunderstanding of salvation “tends to produce consumers of Jesus’ merit” rather than “disciples of Jesus’ Way.”^[48]

On that note...

A way of life

The original name for the community of Jesus’ apprentices was “the Way” or “followers of the Way.”

Acts 9v2: “[Saul] asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way...”

Acts 19v23: “About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way.”

Acts 24v14: “I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way.”

These are just a few examples. The Greek word for “way” is *hodos*. The word literally means “a road or path,” but Jesus used it as a metaphor for apprenticeship to him.

In this word picture is a simple but revolutionary idea: The Way of Jesus is not just a theology (a set of ideas that we believe in our heads). It *is* that, but it’s more.

And it’s not just ethics (a list of dos and don’ts that we obey or disobey). It *is* that, but it’s still more.

It’s exactly what it sounds like—*a way of life*.

One way to paraphrase Jesus’ invitation to “follow me” is to say, “Adopt my overall way of life to experience the *life* I have on offer.”

I love this from the Eastern Orthodox bishop Kallistos Ware:

Christianity is more than a theory about the universe, more than teachings written down on paper; it is a path along which we journey—in the deepest and richest sense, the *way of life*.^[49]

So often in the church, much is said about what to believe and what is right or wrong (which I'm all for), but *so little* is said about a lifestyle that is conducive to life with God. Yet *lifestyle* is where the money is.

Jesus famously said,

I am the way and the truth and the life.^[50]

People misread this as a statement about who's in or out and who's going to hell and who's en route to heaven, but that's not likely what Jesus meant. It's far more likely he was saying that the marriage of his truth (his teaching) and his way (his lifestyle) is how to get to the with-God *life* he offers.

As the Presbyterian pastor Eugene Peterson once said, "The Jesus way wedded to the Jesus truth brings about the Jesus life." He then concluded, "Jesus as the truth gets far more attention than Jesus as the way. Jesus as the way is the most frequently evaded metaphor among the Christians with whom I have worked for fifty years as a North American pastor."^[51]

There is a way of life—modeled personally by Jesus himself—that is *far* beyond anything else on offer in this world. It can open you up to God's presence and power in ways most people only dream. But it requires you to follow a path marked out for you by Jesus himself. Jesus also said,

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road [*hodos*/way] that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the

gate and narrow the road [*hodos*/way] that leads to life, and only a few find it.^[52]

One interpretation of this teaching is that only a few people are “going to heaven when they die” and that everyone else is on the train to the eternal torture chamber. Here’s a different interpretation that I find more compelling: The Way of Jesus is “narrow,” meaning, it is *a very specific way to live*. And if you follow it, it will lead you to *life*, both in this age and the age to come.

The “broad” way is that of the majority culture, which is as simple as it is crass: “Follow the crowd and do whatever you want.” Billions of people live this way, but it does *not* lead them to life; instead, it often leads to destruction. It leads to countless stories of people falling to pieces and never reaching their promise or potential—what Jesus called “eternal life,” which describes not just *quantity* but *quality* of life. This eternal life is a new way to be human through union with God, beginning now and stretching over the horizon of death into forever.

Jesus was constantly offering this life to any who would follow him. “I have come that they may have life, and have it *to the full*,”^[53] he said. So much life that our “cup overflows.”^[54]

It seems that it’s almost always a minority who say yes to Jesus’ invitation. But you can be one of the lucky few—an apprentice of Jesus.

Because this staggering offer of life is available to *all*.

Whoever means *whoever*

Jesus would regularly stand in front of large crowds and make this invitation:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.^[55]

Notice the opening word: *whoever*. That would have been electrifying to Jesus' hearers. Remember what I said earlier about how only the best of the best *of the best* got to apprentice under a rabbi? Like an elite university today, rabbis were highly selective about whom they accepted as students because the quality of the students reflected on the quality of the teacher. As a rule, a rabbi would *never* risk rejection; he would do the rejecting.

Not Rabbi Jesus.

Whoever.

And whoever meant *whoever*—fisherman, Zealot, tax collector, even betrayer. Torah devotee or sex worker. Religious bigot or woman caught in the act of adultery. Intellectual elite or blind beggar on the side of the road. Jesus invited *all* to apprentice under him into life in the kingdom of God.

And nothing's changed over time: We're all *still* invited, no matter who we are or what we've done. Oppressed or oppressor. Upwardly mobile or entrenched in poverty. Polymath or high

school dropout. Fastidious health nut or addict. Mentally sound or not. Virgin or sexually promiscuous. Married, divorced, or divorced again. Hyper-religious or fallen away. Full of faith or racked by doubt.

Whoever means *whoever*.

Now we're finally ready to circle back to the question we began part 1 with: What would prompt Simon to drop his net on the beach, walk away from his career, and follow Jesus all on a moment's notice?

Are you kidding me? he would have thought. *This is the chance of a lifetime.*

Let me attempt a clumsy adaptation from our era: Imagine you're a high school dropout who always dreamed of becoming a professor. You wanted desperately to go to college, but you couldn't get accepted. Now imagine you're working a dead-end job in food service: low hourly wage and long, monotonous days. One day as you're watching the clock from behind the cash register, a world-famous professor from a prestigious university walks through the door on a pit stop from his worldwide book tour. He takes an instant liking to you and says, "If you come with me right now, you can become my student. I'll give you a full-ride scholarship. You can live in my home and study under me. And I'll teach you everything I know and give you access to all my resources. I believe that you have the capacity to one day do what I do. It will be the hardest thing you've ever done, but it

will pay dividends you cannot possibly imagine. But you have to come with me now.”

What would you do? What anyone in their right mind would do: Throw your apron on the floor, dance a Scottish jig, and *run* out the door behind him.

Simon and Andrew were fishermen. Think about that for a second: This means they *didn't* make it into an apprenticeship program. They *weren't* the best of the best of the best; they were the ones who got sent home to “make babies and pray they become rabbis.”

But Jesus invited them to become his apprentices.

Before they believed in Jesus, he believed in *them*.

I've never attempted Alexandre Dumas's sixteen-hundred-page tome *The Count of Monte Cristo*,^[56] but the movie with Jim Caviezel is one of my favorites. Caviezel's character, Edmond Dantès, is betrayed by his best friend and unjustly incarcerated in the island prison Château d'If. He falls into an unlikely friendship with Abbé Faria, a fellow inmate and priest. Dantès is drawn to the priest but turned off by his faith in Jesus. My favorite scene in the movie is when, with his dying breath, Abbé Faria tells Dantès not to use the treasure for revenge, for “God said, ‘Vengeance is mine.’”

“I don't believe in God,” replies Dantès.

Then comes the priest's haunting line: "It doesn't matter. He believes in you."^[57]

We talk a lot about the call to believe in Jesus—to put your trust and confidence in him to lead you to life. This is good and fitting. But it must also be said that *Jesus believes in you*. He believes that you can become his apprentice. Starting right where you are, you can follow him into a life in the kingdom that fulfills your deepest desires.

He believes that you can live under the loving gaze of the Father; you can also become the kind of person who is *like* the Father—loving and joyful and full of peace, patience, and kindness. You can grow into a person of happiness, even in times of great suffering. The kind of person who is not afraid of suffering or even of death, who is free of the emotional need for things to go your own way. You can fulfill your purpose. You can even learn to do many of the incredible things Jesus did. To see the signs of his kingdom manifest in your ordinary life.

It's possible—all of it.

But it's not *inevitable*.

It won't just happen by chance.

There are no accidental saints.

You can't just slip your hand up at the end of a sermon. It's a high bar of entry: It will require you to reorder your entire life around following Jesus as your undisputed top priority, over your job,

your money, your reputation—over everything. Yet all these things will find their rightful place once integrated into a life of apprenticeship.

This life can be *your* life.

All you have to do is let go of your nets...