

THE UPWARD CALLING

TO FOLLOW JESUS 1



Following Jesus begins within.

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A ReVision Study from

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Upward Calling

The Upward Calling
To Follow Jesus Part 1
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Welcome to *The Upward Calling*

It's easy to get the idea that following Jesus is a matter primarily of *external* commitments.

That is, if you want to follow Jesus, you have to find a church, plug into a group, join up for some ministry, or by some other *external* means let it be known that you are a disciple.

Without invalidating that view, I want to insist that following Jesus is *first of all* a matter of the soul – heart, mind, and conscience. Unless we are *inwardly* devoted to Jesus, focused on Him, and committed to knowing and growing in Him, and doing His will, no amount of *external* involvements will make us true followers.

Not for very long, at any rate.

We begin this series, *To Follow Jesus*, where true discipleship must always begin – within, in the disposition and bent of our souls. Only as we focus on the *upward calling* which is ours in Christ Jesus will our discipleship have any staying power. Keep that focus, and press on in seeking Jesus, and you will be His follower all the days of your life.

We are happy to provide this resource for your use at no charge. If you find these, or other resources of The Fellowship of Ailbe, helpful in your walk with and work for the Lord, please consider sending a gift to support this work and help us extend our outreach to others. You can donate at our website, www.ailbe.org, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

May the Lord bless you as you take up this study, *To Follow Jesus*, that you might grow in Him and His calling each and every day of your life.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Look to Jesus

...one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3.13, 14

Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?" Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, "But Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me." John 21.20-22

Mind your own business!

In many ways we're all a bit like the Apostle Peter, easily distracted from the *one thing* that matters most in life – knowing, loving, and following Jesus Christ.

Having just been reinstated in his love for Jesus, and given clear instructions to shepherd the Lord's flock, Peter simply could not be content to get on with the Lord's personal call. John reports that, as Peter and Jesus walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee on that wondrous morning, Peter noticed John trailing along behind them. He could not resist asking Jesus for some insight into what He had in store for the beloved apostle. But Jesus answered Peter's inquiry brusquely: "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me."

This is the great challenge, the gauntlet thrown at the feet of every believer: Follow Jesus. Disciples are those who follow a master, and Jesus is the Master above all masters, Whom we must follow. Not merely *confess*, but *follow*.

Jesus is the journey and destination of God's call on our lives. He is with us always, His Spirit dwells within us, and we are seated with Him in heavenly places (Matt. 28.20; Jn. 14.16, 17; Eph. 2.6). Jesus leads us up and above the worldly fray and ways, into the realm of Kingdom righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Matt. 6.33; Rom. 14.17, 18). Our lives have been hidden with Christ in God, and He is the great prize of our lives, as we are *daily* transformed into His image, and when in glory we shall see Him face to face and be like Him (Col. 3.3; 2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Jn. 3.1-3).

And yet we often seem more concerned about other things, lesser things, than about the great business of following Jesus for which we have been redeemed and called.

An upward prize

I suspect this is so for two reasons: First, it may be that we have never really understood how great is the privilege and how wonderful are the blessings of following Jesus. We have *tasted* of the Lord, and we know that taste to be good. But unless we are *partaking* of Him with the kind of intimacy and consistency that leads to peace and joy in every situation, we will never know His power for living that makes all things new.

And second, it's possible that many of us are not entirely clear on what following Jesus involves. Perhaps we have not truly considered the implications of that word, *follow*, so that we have no real sense of the adventure to which we have been called, the challenges we must be ready to surmount, or the progress in Christ's life we must strive to realize.

If we really saw following Jesus as Paul did, as the *prize* and *upward calling* worthy of our exclusive devotion and constant attention, we might be less likely to be distracted by the concerns and diversions of this world. Jesus is not just some gold star to be pinned on the résumé of our lives – like a diploma or certificate of recognition, a promotion or a raise, but limited to our spiritual interests and aspirations. Jesus is not merely a prize among many other prizes in our lives. He is *the prize*, the great attainment, the *sine qua non* of all of life,

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the prize without Whom all of life falls into a heap and turns to ashes. Whatever we're striving for in life, whatever we hope to attain, for those who understand following Jesus as Paul did, these are but milestones or benchmarks along the longer and more arduous journey of *gaining Jesus Christ in glory*.

Further, following Jesus is an *upward calling*. It lifts our eyes, fuels our hopes, and raises our aspirations in life beyond the fleeting pleasures and trials of mere earthly existence, into the unchanging realm of saints and angels, where Christ is seated at the Father's right hand, building His Church and advancing His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Following Jesus means pursuing an *upward* trajectory in life, one that lifts us daily above the gravity and grovel of space and time, enabling us to live the *then and there* of the glory of God in the *here and now* of everyday life. Focused on Jesus, and drawing ever closer to Him, we discover direction, wisdom, joy, pleasure, hope, and power. Thus we bring the transforming reality of eternal life into the everyday activities and events of our earthly experience, making the most of all our time and opportunities, and beaming the hope of glory through all our words and deeds (Eph. 5.15-17; 1 Pet. 3.15).

A uniquely personal calling

"You follow Me!" Jesus insisted. You – Peter, former fisherman, rock of the Church, chief of the Apostles, husband, pastor, evangelist – "You follow Me!" Jesus issues that same calling to every one of His followers. Each of us, given our unique personalities, endowments, and opportunities, is called to follow Jesus. Certainly that will find each of us honing in on a *common vision* and attending to *common areas of endeavor*. But *how* we pursue that vision, the *specific nature* of the commitments we make and the *efforts* we undertake, will vary with each follower of the Lord.

Jesus is calling you to follow Him. To follow Him as you are, where you are, and as you are going. Jesus intends to equip and empower you for your unique and special place within that ongoing work, as He leads you along the glorious, upward path of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit into Himself – the great prize and upward calling of God.

For reflection

1. What image or vision comes to your mind as you think about Jesus as the *prize* and *upward calling* of your life?
2. What are some of the primary distractions that keep you from seeing this vision more clearly, and following Jesus more consistently?
3. Watch the video about your Personal Mission Field ([click here](#)). Then download the worksheet ([click here](#)) and map out the field in which the Lord calls you to follow Him.

Next steps – Conversation: How would you explain to a new Christian what it means to "follow Jesus"? What would you point to in your life to illustrate what the life of following Jesus entails? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions.

2 More than Anything and Everything

So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonab, do you love Me more than these?" John 21.15

The question

Jesus' question to Peter is deliberately vague: "Do you love Me more than you love these things?" Peter might have thought within himself, "What things?" But I suspect that thought, if it did occur to him, didn't last very long. Peter knew what Jesus was asking.

Jesus was asking Peter if he loved Him more than *any* of these things – the fishing, the friends, the fire, the food, all the trappings of life in the world – and if he loved Him more than *all* these things. Because, as we know, Peter had not that long before this moment on that Galilean shore clearly demonstrated that, no, in fact, he did *not* love Jesus enough to own up to being one of His followers. He loved his life, his freedom, his safety, his being unhindered and unharmed *more* than he loved Jesus.

Jesus' question, therefore, was eminently fair, given the background.

As we consider the requirements of following Jesus, the same question comes to you and me: Do we love Jesus more than anything and everything else? Are we willing to renounce everything, to sacrifice all, to give whatever is required of us in order to love Jesus and follow Him?

Unless we can answer that question in the affirmative, we have no hope of becoming true followers of the Lord. For discipleship begins in a willing and eager soul – a heart, mind, and conscience completely devoted to Jesus Christ in love. Jesus' question to Peter was meant both to *confront* him, so that *he* would face up to the condition of his soul, and to *restore* him, so that he could move on from past failures into a new life of true discipleship.

Examine yourself

At the end of two very difficult letters to the Christians in Corinth, the Apostle Paul proffered a challenge not unlike that which Jesus put before Peter. In the light of all he'd seen of the Corinthian church – its schisms, immorality, lack of spiritual maturity, self-centeredness, and all the rest – Paul had reason to question the *reality* of the Corinthians' confession of faith. These people *talked* a good game when it came to Christianity, but they sure didn't *live* the faith that Jesus taught. In 2 Corinthians 13.5 Paul sternly instructed the believers in Corinth, "Examine yourselves *as to* whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified."

He might just as well have asked them, "Do you love Jesus more than these – all these squabbles, all this complacency, this lackadaisical attitude toward sin, this vaunting of pseudo-spirituality, this taking advantage of one another, this flouting of God's plan for worship? Do you love Jesus more than these?"

This is the question, and this is the challenge to every one of us: Examine yourself!

The soul that loves Jesus

"The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,/I will not, I cannot desert to his foes." So wrote Robert Keen in his 1787 hymn, "[How Firm a Foundation](#)." The soul that rests on Jesus is completely at home in Him, finds its security and joy in Him, desires only to be with Him and in Him forever, and turns a blind eye to anything that might distract or divert him from the companionship of His Lord. This is the soul of a true follower of Jesus, one who loves Him more than anything and everything else.

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The soul that rests on Jesus grows from a *mind* set on Christ, a mind devoted to *studying* Him in the gospels, *meditating* on Him exalted in glory, and *seeking* Him in all the ways He reveals Himself day by day.

The soul that rests on Jesus involves a *heart* captivated by the loveliness of Jesus, in *awe* of His majesty and strength, *delighting* to see and participate in Him, and *eager to love* Him more.

The soul that rests on Jesus has Jesus and pleasing Him as its *first priority in all things*. Its *conscience* is tuned to the priorities of God's Law and the agenda of the risen Christ, and nothing is more important than what Jesus wants at any moment.

The soul that thus loves Jesus will be eager to *prove its love* for Him in words and deeds of complete and ungrudging obedience. And it is in such obedience that the rewards of such love will be known. Though it cost us everything to follow Jesus, we will begrudge the loss of nothing, just as long as we are following Jesus, rapt in love and devoted in the whole of life to Him and His glory.

Do we love Jesus like this? Examine yourself: Do you love your life more than Jesus? Do you love Jesus because of what you think He can do for you? Or do you love Him simply because He alone is worthy of love, because He has first loved us so completely and so well?

For reflection

1. What kinds of things typically get in the way of Christians following Jesus more consistently?
2. Is fear of other people a hindrance to follow Jesus? Why?
3. What's involved in keeping your mind, heart, and conscience focused on following Jesus?

Next steps – Preparation: What “test” would you establish to help a new believer determine whether or not his actions at any moment were consistent with love for Jesus? What should we be looking for in our souls – our minds, hearts, and consciences? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions.

3 Seek Jesus

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. Colossians 3.1, 2

We cannot follow what we do not know

Henry James' short story, "The Beast in the Jungle," is about a young man who feels certain life holds something really special for him. Something exciting, maybe even a little dangerous, but something that will give complete meaning and purpose to his life. He's not sure what that something is, but he insists it's like a beast in the jungle: When it springs out of the forest before him, he'll recognize it and wrestle it into submission. Then his life will be full and complete.

As it turns out, the young man failed to recognize what would have been for him the supreme happiness of his life. At the end of the story he is reduced to bitter tears. Because he didn't really know *what* he was seeking, he was not able to recognize it at precisely the moment his life might have come together and made sense.

For many who call themselves Christians, Jesus Christ is like that beast in the jungle. They *know*, or at least they *claim* that, Jesus is the most important thing in their lives, the thing that makes them happiest and most completely fulfilled. But because they don't *really know* Him, they don't know how to *follow* Him, and so the true joy and fulfillment Jesus promises (Jn. 10.10) consistently eludes them, and they wonder why their Christian lives aren't more joyful, powerful, fruitful, and full.

Consider Jesus

Put succinctly, we cannot *follow* what we do not *know*. And if we do not *know* Jesus, if our vision and understanding of Him are vague or merely general, *following* Him, in any sense, will be an act of self-deception.

We say that we know Jesus. To know Jesus Christ is to have eternal life (Jn. 17.3). To know Jesus is to be caught up in the Kingdom and glory of God and to have embarked on a life above the merely mundane plane of existence – life "under the heavens," as Solomon explained it, rather than merely "under the sun." To know Jesus is to recognize Him, and in order to recognize Jesus we must consider Him carefully and well. Otherwise, we will not stay the course of our discipleship – following Jesus, even if necessary, to the death.

The writer of Hebrews understood this. Twice in his epistle he instructs us to "consider Jesus." We must *consider Jesus* if we have any hope of persisting in the faith, no matter the struggle or threat that comes our way (Heb. 3.1). And we must *consider Jesus* if we are to run our own particular race as fully and swiftly as possible (Heb. 12.3). Following Jesus, it seems, means considering Him carefully.

The writer uses two different words which we translate by the term, *consider*. The first, in Hebrews 3.1, is the same word Jesus used to instruct us to consider the lilies of the field. It seems to have an aesthetic sense to it, implying wonder, admiration, mystery, and awe. To consider Jesus in this way is to wonder at His beauty, majesty, mystery, and power, and to delight in meditating on Him and lingering in His presence.

The second use of *consider*, in Hebrews 12.3, encourages a more analytical, logical, and even theological consideration of Jesus Christ. We must *study* Jesus, think about all the implications of His life, death, and resurrection, and apply our minds to taking every thought captive for obedience to Him (2 Cor. 10.3-5).

In short, to consider Jesus we must focus on Him in all His spiritual and moral excellence, as well as in all His glory and work. And there is no better way to do this than to follow Paul's advice and *set our minds* on Christ, exalted at the right hand of God.

Glorious in His exaltation

Jesus Christ is exalted in glory, reigning at the right hand of God in a glorified body, carrying on the work He began on earth of destroying the works of the devil and advancing the Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit of God (Rom. 14.17, 18). Many passages of Scripture give us a glimpse of Jesus exalted – in the Psalms and prophets, in Revelation, even in the epistles of Paul, Peter, and John. It can be difficult to bring all these glimpses together into one cogent and beautiful portrait of Jesus exalted in glory, but this is precisely what Paul intends for us to do. He even prayed for us – when he prayed for the church in Ephesus – that the eyes of our hearts may be opened and the Spirit of God might illumine our minds to the beauty and wonder and majesty and greatness, and to the finished work and glory of our exalted Savior and King (Eph. 1.15-23).

To seek Jesus like this is to encounter jaw-dropping beauty, and to have our minds filled with the scope, majesty, and power of His work of redemption and restoration. It is to want to be like Jesus, to shed everything which makes us ashamed or reluctant to be in His presence, and to join in His work with all our soul and strength, though it cost us our own lives in the bargain.

When we see Jesus like this, considering Him carefully and well, then we will be ready to follow Him, wherever He leads.

For reflection

1. How would you describe your approach to *seeking* Jesus at this time?
2. Explain the two uses of *consider* outlined in this article. Is this part of your practice of seeking Jesus?
3. What's one thing you could do to begin seeking Jesus more consistently every day?

Next steps – Transformation: How might you improve this discipline of “considering Jesus” in your spiritual life? Talk with a pastor or church leader, and come up with one or two things you will begin to practice more consistently.

4 The Lord's Agenda

"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Matthew 16.18

The centerpiece of history

It might surprise some Christians to know that the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of history.

How many of us who call ourselves followers of Christ even think of our church as the centerpiece of our own lives?

For many Christians, the most important time of their lives is organized around something other than the church. Work, or their family, friends, or avocations take up more of their time and demand more of their best energy and attention than they ever invest in their local church. It's not that they don't love their church. It's just that the church doesn't occupy the same place in their lives as it does in the mind of Jesus.

Jesus declared that, at the top of His agenda in these days before He comes again, is the work of building His Church, so that, *through* His Church His Kingdom can come on earth as it is in heaven. The local church is both a *sign* and *outpost* of the Kingdom, making its existence, health, and growth of primary importance in the Lord's agenda. "I will build my church," the Lord declared, and we can assume that, exalted in glory at the Father's right hand, this is the most important project on His list of things to do.

So if the church is *not* that important to us, how can we claim to be followers of Jesus Christ?

Members of His Body

Every follower of Jesus Christ is a member of the Church, which is the Body of the Lord (1 Cor. 12). Each of us has something to contribute to the health and growth of the Body of Christ, the local congregation where we join with other believers to worship and serve the Lord, and the Church of our Lord throughout the world.

But if we only look at our church as a resource for meeting *our own* spiritual needs, we're not likely to contribute much to the wellbeing of others. Instead, we'll always be looking to church leaders and programs to bring some benefit to us. And, since we tend to be rather easily satisfied when it comes to spiritual matters, we'll find some niche in our church that "meets our needs" and that will be about the extent of our involvement.

But in a healthy, growing body, the individual members don't simply leech off the rest of the body. They have a contribution to make, be it ever so small, to the health and growth of the whole. Every true follower of Jesus will want to find his or her place on the Lord's church-building agenda, and to take up whatever work that place may require for helping to make their local congregation a healthy, growing church.

Jesus is building His Church through the individual contributions of each member of His Body. We will be on the Lord's agenda when building His church, using the gifts and resources God has provided for us, is at the top of our agenda as well.

Two commitments

Becoming a contributing member to the health and growth of your local church involves two primary commitments. First, you must *make yourself available for the equipping you will need* to become a contributing member of the Lord's work in building His Church (Eph. 4.11, 12).

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None of us comes to faith in Jesus fully equipped to take our place in His agenda. We need to learn and grow, and to develop the gifts and abilities which the Lord provides each of us uniquely. We have to learn new disciplines, discover the best ways of managing our time and resources, and find places of service appropriate to the skills and inclinations the Lord has built into us.

We need, in other words, to be *always growing* as a member of the Body of Christ, always learning and seeking to improve our skills for contributing to the building of Christ's church.

And then, second, we need to *get to work* doing those ministries of neighbor-love that channel the grace of the Lord to others at the point of their need. Each of us has a [Personal Mission Field](#) to which the Lord has appointed us, where we are to *shine* like light, *work* like salt, and *influence* like leaven to bring the Good News of Jesus to the people around us. Working this Personal Mission Field is a full-time calling from the Lord. The better we work it, the more we touch others with the grace of the Lord, and the more His Body is built up in the unity and maturity He intends (Eph. 4.11-16).

We are true followers of our Lord Jesus if we take seriously His calling to be active, contributing members to the health and growth of His Body. This means our local church has to become more important to us, and we need to be equipped for the unique works of ministry we can do which help to bring the Lord's agenda to completion.

To follow Jesus is to build His Church. Let's get on the Lord's agenda together, shall we?

For reflection

1. Meditate on Ephesians 4.11-16. How does Jesus *build* His Church today?
2. What do we mean by saying that building the Church is the Lord's agenda? How can we know when we're *on* that agenda with the Lord?
3. What should we be looking to in order to determine whether our church is being built the way the Lord intends?

Next steps – Transformation: At present, how would you describe your contribution to building up your local church? What would you like your contribution to be? Talk with a pastor or church leader about these questions.

5 Grow in the Lord

...but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. 2 Peter 3.18

A consistent message

Peter's word of exhortation to the believers in Asia Minor is echoed throughout the Scriptures, especially in the New Testament. Those who are followers of Jesus Christ are determined to grow in Him, to learn Him better, love Him more, increase in Him, and live as His witnesses in the world.

Paul, John, James, and the writer of Hebrews concur with Peter that it is every believer's duty and privilege to grow in the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 3.1-3; Col. 1.27, 28; Heb. 5.11-6.9; Jms. 1.21-25; 1 Pet. 2.1, 2; 1 Jn. 3:1-3; etc.). We touched on this in our previous installment. We do not come to faith in Jesus Christ as fully mature believers, ready and able to serve the Lord in our [Personal Mission Fields](#). We must be equipped for this work, so that we can grow up to wield the gifts God has given us for serving others.

But growing in the Lord is not just a matter of becoming more adept at ministry. Peter says we are to grow in the *grace and knowledge* of the Lord Jesus, and not merely in the skills for ministry we need to make our contribution to building the church. Without continuous growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, we won't be inclined either to acquire the ministry skills we need or to use the gifts God has given us for working our Personal Mission Field.

The inward motivation

The motivation for service as a follower of Jesus Christ comes from within, from our souls. Only as we increase in the mind, heart, and conscience of the Lord will we devote our lives to following and serving Him. As Paul put it, we need to keep learning Jesus, so that the new person we are becoming in Him will overtake and replace the old person we were before we began to follow Him (Eph. 4.17-24).

We have the *mind* of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16), but unless we work to improve that mind, we'll never have the outlook, worldview, or analytical abilities of Jesus. And we won't *think* about ourselves or others in the way Jesus does. We develop the mind of Christ as we bring all our thoughts and all our thinking into subjection to Him, and in line with His Word (2 Cor. 10.3-5).

We have the *heart* of the Lord, given to us by His Spirit (Ezek. 36.26, 27), to help us grow in love for God and our neighbors. But we have to nurture the love of God in our hearts before we will live that love in our relationships, roles, and responsibilities. The Law of God can be particularly helpful to us in understanding the requirements of love. As we grow in the mind of Christ, we will learn to love His Law as He did, and to fulfill it in words and deeds of love for God and neighbors (Matt. 5.17-19).

Our *consciences* have been renewed in Jesus as well, so that we can have the right values and priorities at work in our wills (Heb. 9.14). But our renewed conscience needs to be daily fortified in the Law and Word of God, so that we *will* the Lord's will in all things (Rom. 2.14, 15).

As we grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus in our souls, the members of our bodies – our eyes, ears, tongues, hands, feet, and all the rest – will learn to follow Jesus and to glorify God in everything we do. As a person is in the depths of his soul, so he will be in the everyday details of life (Job 33.3; Prov. 4.23).

Nurturing the soul

Like any purposeful, fruitful growth, increasing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord takes time and attention. It requires the right tools, daily discipline, goals, objectives, and benchmarks, and, in every case, others to help us bring forth the fruit of our salvation.

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Jesus taught His first disciples that they must *take up certain disciplines* in order to nurture their souls for following Him. They have to learn how to pray – fervently, frequently, and from a clean heart (Matt. 6.5-13; Lk. 11.1-13, 18.1). They will set aside time for fasting, in order to train their bodies to be in proper submission to their souls (Matt. 9.15). A good portion of their time will be given to listening to Jesus as He speaks to them from His Word (Lk. 10.38-42). Through His apostles, He instructs those who would follow Him to take up other disciplines, such as gathering with other believers regularly for worship (Heb. 10.25), singing and giving thanks in the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5.18-21), encouraging one another in love and good works (Heb. 10.24), serving the needs of others (Jn. 13.1-15), giving freely and liberally for the work of the Lord (1 Cor. 16.1-4), and keeping a close watch over our souls and lives, so that we make the best use of all our time for following the Lord (1 Tim. 4.16; Eph. 5.15-17).

The call to follow Jesus is a call to a disciplined life, one designed to help us make progress in the Lord throughout the course of our lives. We cannot follow Jesus unless we are practicing such disciplines as these, submitting to the Spirit as He shapes and nurtures our souls for growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. If we pursue these disciplines diligently, we can expect to see certain evidences of true and lively faith issuing from within us through the words and deeds of our daily lives: the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5.22, 23), the tokens of love (1 Cor. 13.4-7), the holiness that comes from obedience to God's Law (2 Cor. 7.1), power for bearing witness to Jesus (Acts 1.8), and the gifts and abilities we need for serving God in our everyday lives (1 Cor. 12.7-11).

To follow Jesus is to follow Him with every aspect of our lives, beginning in our souls. Get discipleship right, there in the depths of your being, and the rest of your life will fall into line as the Lord intends.

For reflection

1. What does someone look like who is growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ?
2. What's the difference between the mind, the heart, and the conscience? How do these contribute to or detract from growth in the Lord?
3. What disciplines have you found most helpful in growing in the Lord?

Next steps – Preparation: Is your practice of spiritual disciplines what it should be to sustain growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord? Talk with a pastor or church leader about this question.

6 Sent like Jesus

So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." John 20.21

On a mission

During His earthly sojourn, Jesus Christ was a Man on a mission. He came to fulfill all righteousness and to take away the sins of His people. He came to give life, and to give it abundantly. He came to bring near the Kingdom of God and to make known the glory of the Father.

Every moment and activity of every day of Jesus' life was driven and guided by His mission. And, His mission on earth completed, He said to His disciples, and to all who would follow Him, "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you."

The followers of Jesus Christ are a people with a mission. Everyone who follows Jesus takes up the mission of Christ as the organizing motif and driving force of his life. To follow Jesus is to be sent into the world as He was sent into it, showing and proclaiming the Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, and calling people to repent and believe the Gospel (Rom. 14.17, 18; Acts 17.30).

We can be certain that we're following Jesus when *His* mission is *our* mission as well.

A mission in five roles

But how can we take up this mission in every aspect of our lives, so that *all* our lives, and *all the time* of our lives are fully devoted to following Him?

Let us focus on Jesus as we answer this question. In carrying out His mission on earth, Jesus took on five different roles. If we can embrace these roles and perform them within our own Personal Mission Fields, we may expect to make real and regular progress in fulfilling the mission of Christ.

What are these five roles?

First is the role of a *seeker*. Jesus sought His Father and His Father's will in everything He did. He came to seek and to save lost people (Lk. 19.10). He reached out to others, took the initiative in coming to them, learning their names, and making their needs His peculiar focus. He did not simply go to Jerusalem, rent a space, and hang out a sign advertising "Religion at 11." He was active and proactive in reaching out to others, and when we are seekers of others like that, we will be following in the footsteps of our Lord.

As Jesus found people, second, He looked for ways to be a *servant* to them. Jesus served God by taking on the form of a Servant and coming amongst us to restore us to the Father. He healed the sick, encouraged people in their distress, spoke words of kindness and compassion to those who suffered or were distraught. As when He was in the upper room with His disciples, Jesus didn't wait around for others to serve Him. He was alert to the opportunities around Him and took the initiative to care for others with the love of God. Jesus calls all who would follow Him to learn to be a servant after His example (Mk. 10.42-45).

Third, Jesus was a *shepherd* for those entrusted to His care. He came as the promised Good Shepherd to gather, secure, and bless His Father's flocks (Ezek. 34.10ff). He built His followers together as a flock, led them into a new vision of life, fed them with His Word, and defended them amid the temptations and trials of life. He looked out for the souls of His sheep, and He calls all who follow Him to have the same shepherding regard for one another (Heb. 13.17; Gal. 6.1-10).

Fourth, and perhaps most obviously, Jesus was a *sower*. He received the Word from His Father and sowed it

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lavishly wherever He went. He spoke and preached and testified and taught the Word of God at every opportunity, to any who would listen. He was bold in proclaiming the reality of the Kingdom and urgent in encouraging people to repent and believe the Good News. He has given His Spirit to His followers so that we might continue this work of sowing the Word and being witnesses for Him (Acts 1.8).

Finally, Jesus was a *steward* of the will and work of God. He said He always did the Father's will and spoke only the words the Father gave Him. Jesus did not waste time. He was frugal with resources, efficient in all His undertakings, and in continuous communication with His Father. He calls His followers also to be good stewards of all that God has entrusted to them, so that they might return glory to Him with every "talent" they possess (Matt. 25.14-30).

Living sacrifices

The Apostle Paul said that the followers of Jesus should regard themselves as living sacrifices to the Lord (Rom. 12.1, 2). All we are, have, hope for, and do should say to the world that we are a people on a mission, and that the mission we are pursuing is the one Jesus began when He was on earth – that of seeking and advancing the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

As we learn to fulfill the roles of seeker, servant, shepherd, sower, and steward in every area of our lives, we will find the power of Christ working through us in new, exciting, Christ-like ways. When we follow Jesus, on the mission of Jesus, taking up the roles Jesus Himself performed, we cannot fail to know the *reality* of Jesus, at work within us, willing and doing according to His good pleasure (Phil. 2.12, 13).

And as this happens, there will be no doubt in our minds or anyone else's that we are followers of Jesus Christ, indeed.

For reflection

1. Jesus came to earth to proclaim and embody the Kingdom of God. What does that mean for His sending *you* to the world?
2. Review the roles Jesus fulfilled during His earthly sojourn. In which of these do you most need to grow and improve?
3. What does it mean to be a *living sacrifice* unto the Lord?

Next steps – Conversation: How well do you understand the mission of Jesus? The roles Jesus fulfilled when He was on earth? How can you begin to become more a person who is truly "on the mission" of the Lord? Talk with a few Christian friends about these questions. Make some commitments and look for ways you can encourage one another in following Jesus.

7 Firm to the End

“But hold fast what you have till I come.” Revelation 2.25

All of life, all life long

The call of Jesus Christ to follow Him is a summons to an entirely new way of life. As we set our minds on Christ, exalted in glory, building His Church, and advancing His Kingdom, we will take up with greater consistency and effect His Kingdom-and-glory calling to follow Him here and now (1 Thess. 2.12). We can't follow Jesus and keep dragging around the old perspectives, priorities, and practices that characterized us before He came along and said, “Follow Me.” The first disciples had to leave their nets and their former ways of thinking, living, and relating to people, and to learn the new ways of a Kingdom not of this world. As they did, they discovered a purpose to live and die for, and power and joy and love, which they were able to nurture and sustain throughout the entire course of their lives.

The first disciples understood that following Jesus is a call to an *entirely new way of life*, for all of one's life, all life long. We are not true followers of Jesus if our devotion to Him is merely some niche in our lives, or one of many commitments we tout as defining who we are. When we can say with the Apostle Paul, “For me to live is Christ,” then we will be followers of Jesus indeed (Phil. 1.21).

Challenges to following Jesus

Jesus promised that all who chose to follow Him could expect to be challenged. He indicated that those closest to them – their families and friends – would question or even oppose their decision. He said that some people would hate those who followed Him because they would not appreciate having their wicked deeds exposed. Some people, Jesus said, would mistreat His followers and speak evil of them, even in the name of the Lord, thinking they were doing a good thing.

But most of all, Jesus knew, His followers would be opposed, harassed, and harried in their discipleship by spiritual forces of wickedness in high places. Jesus dealt with the devil and his henchmen throughout the course of His earthly sojourn, and, while our struggles are perhaps not as dramatic as were His, they are just as real, and just as constant.

All who would follow Jesus need to be prepared to engage in a spiritual struggle that is unrelenting, subtle, and subversive of true faith (Eph. 6.10-20) What are the signs that we have entered into the spiritual battle zone, and how can we keep up our discipleship in the face of withering spiritual fire?

In the fray

For the most part, our experience of the wiles of the devil will not be the dramatic, demonic sort. The devil is *wily*, we must remember, and not usually *overt*. He will *sow doubts* in our minds, doubts about the power of prayer, the reliability of God's Word, the importance of seeking the Kingdom, and the efficacy of sharing the Gospel with others. Then, when we demur at any of these points, he will sow doubts into our souls concerning whether we are truly believers in Jesus at all!

Temptation is another way the devil tries to divert us from following Jesus. Being in temptation, the German theologian Helmut Thielicke wrote, is finding yourself at the point of wanting to be disloyal to God. Our affections go awry, our thinking gets confused, our Kingdom priorities become compromised, and we end up wanting to do the very things that put Jesus on the cross so many years ago. Rather than following Jesus through temptation to growth, we betray Jesus by lapsing into sin. Which is then followed by shame and doubt and self-denigration – more tools in the devil's toolbox.

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And you can also know that you've entered the spiritual fray whenever you find that you are thinking about your discipleship in terms of *what's in it for you*. The devil appeals to pride and self-interest. He will encourage you to want to *be* somebody, or *be known* as a serious Christian, or *be visible* as a leader, or whatever. He wants you to seek glory and honor and prestige in the name of Jesus, because then he will have frustrated – or so he supposes – the Lord's determination to bring all glory to Himself.

But we are better advised to remember that we seek no great things for ourselves, but only glory for our God and King (Jer. 45.5; 1 Cor. 10.31).

Take up the weapons of our warfare

This spiritual warfare is unremitting. We can expect to endure it throughout our lives, as long as we are determined to follow Jesus in every area of our lives.

So we need to learn the right use of all the weapons God has put at our disposal (Eph. 6.10-20), chief among these being faith, righteousness, prayer, and the Word of God. Devote yourself to Jesus every day, and every moment of every day, and then arm yourself with the tools and weapons you'll need for advancing His Kingdom. If you will, no matter how fierce the struggle becomes for your soul, as a true follower of Jesus, you will endure.

And those who hold fast to what they have in Jesus, and endure to the end, will prove to God, themselves, and everyone who knows them, that they are true followers of the Lord Jesus.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by "spiritual warfare"? What forms does this take?
2. How should we prepare each day for undertaking this spiritual warfare?
3. What does it mean to "hold fast" to what we have in Jesus? How can believers help one another in this work?

Next steps – Preparation: In what ways do you experience spiritual warfare? Are you as prepared for this daily struggle as you should be? Ask a pastor or church leader to help you in learning how to wield all the weapons of spiritual warfare, so that you will be able to hold fast to Jesus through every temptation.

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For reflection or discussion

1. What is meant by “the upward calling”? Why is it *upward*? What makes this a *calling*?
2. Suggest some ways we might increase in love for Jesus.
3. What are spiritual disciplines, and why are they important in learning to follow Jesus?
4. What is a Personal Mission Field? Have you identified your Personal Mission Field?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned about following Jesus from this study? How are you planning to incorporate that lesson into your daily life?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.

