




# Foundational Essay

## FOLLOW JESUS


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### INTRODUCTION

When Jesus says, “Follow me,” we are being invited into God’s reality of reconciling love. When we choose to follow Jesus, to become a disciple, we are choosing to be taught and formed into someone who is Christlike. Jesus shows us what we are choosing: restored fellowship with God and one another.



Jesus leads us to redeemed fellowship with God and all that God loves.



In the biblical accounts about Jesus, he shows us why God so loves the world, how God loves, and what it looks like to live a life rooted in the two greatest commandments to love God and others. Jesus reminded people through his actions and teachings to protect the weak and oppressed, the vulnerable, the least of these. Jesus exhorts, invites, instructs, and welcomes us to follow him, not because of who *he* is, as though Jesus was the leader of a personality cult. Instead, Jesus—in his life, death, and resurrection—leads us to redeemed fellowship with God and all that God loves.

In the Gospel according to John, the “calling” of the first disciples begins some time after John the Baptist (a different John than the Gospel writer) went about testifying about a greater leader who was coming, named Jesus. “Calling” is in quotation marks because we will see that not all journeys of discipleship begin with the instruction from Jesus to “follow me.” As the narrative of John 1:35–51 begins, we see that John testifies to Jesus as the one who is the Son of God, and on whom he saw the Holy Spirit descending. Then . . .

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.

One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). He

brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”


—John 1:35–51

Even in just this one passage there are clearly different ways of becoming disciples, different ways of taking up the choice to follow Jesus, since no single word can capture how one becomes a disciple of Jesus. John’s disciples aren’t called or invited by Jesus, for example. They just start tagging along. Then, one of them goes and gets his brother, saying, “We’ve found the Messiah.” Andrew brings his brother, Simon, to Jesus, who looks him over and gives him a new name. Still, so far, there is no invitation or instruction from Jesus to “follow me.” That doesn’t happen until the next day, when Jesus finds Philip in Galilee and tells him to “follow me.” At which point, Philip, now a disciple, goes and finds Nathanael and says, “We’ve found the one the prophets wrote about.” How does Nathanael become a disciple? By hearing what Jesus says *to* someone else *about* him *as* he’s walking toward him.


In the end, no matter how they join the crew, they are choosing to follow Jesus for particular reasons. They’re not just following some random guy, and they wouldn’t have followed without a reason. In all the Gospel passages about the calling of the disciples, they either have heard of him already (inferred from the text) or they have a personal encounter. At the beginning they cannot know him fully, but they know him enough to willingly change the direction of their lives. Perhaps we can say that, even though the *how* is different, the *why* is broadly the same: they follow Jesus in order to be with him and to learn from him. They accept the invitation because of who Jesus is.

None of them is forced, and the overall tone of the passage is to “come and see.” It is as though Jesus is leading the disciples on a walking tour of God’s love and justice taking shape in embodied lives.

There is no tone or inflection of “Follow me or else!” Rather, we see in the disciples’ varied callings the reflection of our experience that we all become disciples in different ways. It is different things that keep us attached to Christ, that keep us following him. But what we learn from this passage—and what is echoed later in the Gospel, for example, in chapter 10—is that Jesus leads by inviting and caring, that we follow because of what we receive, and that we gather other people into discipleship when their interest perks up by hearing, “Come and see.”



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What follows are four aspects of following Jesus to consider. Jesus asks us to *accept* his invitation, *follow with the community* of his other disciples, *learn* to see everything through the lens of love, and *follow him in the making of disciples*. Each one of these is practiced, not accomplished in one go.

## ACCEPT JESUS' INVITATION

Each one of the disciples in the above passage from John makes their choice to follow Jesus for different reasons, but they are all making the choice to follow. When we say yes to one thing, we are also saying no to another. If we say yes to a vanilla milkshake, we are saying no to a chocolate milkshake. If we say yes to following Jesus, we are saying no to following ourselves. We are saying no to anyone or anything that is not Jesus. This choice has real life-and-death consequences. Jesus holds his disciples to this choice they've made. For instance, when Jesus predicts his impending death as God's plan, his disciple Peter gets upset. Quite upset.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."


—Matthew 16:22–23

Accepting Jesus' invitation, as we can see exemplified in Peter, is something we need to practice. We have to keep coming back and doing it over and over again, choosing over and over again to respond to Jesus' invitation by following him. We see that Peter continues to need this practice—he swears he will never deny Jesus, Jesus tells him otherwise, and then Peter hangs his head in shame when he does deny him. But we are not asked for perfection, and as we read about Peter as told through the Gospel of Luke and in Acts, we see that he continues to the end of his life to follow Jesus, and to help others follow Jesus as well.



When people are exploring trails in a park or in woods, they continually get themselves reoriented to their destination. When one is sailing, ongoing reading of maps and instruments and adjusting of sails and masts keep the boat moving toward its desired harbor. When Christians follow Jesus, ongoing reading of the Holy Spirit, the community, the law of love, and Scripture guide us on the path of discipleship.

My dog, Zippy, recently gave me a clue to what it means to follow Jesus. As Zippy does sometimes when he has something to show me, he sat nearby, staring at me and frequently signaling that he wanted me to follow him. I instinctively said, "Zippy, do you have something to show me?" As I got up to follow him to his prize, I realized, "Oh, *this* is what Jesus means when he says, 'Come and see!'" Jesus invites us to follow him to God. If we get up and follow him, we will join an eternal company of others who also seek to draw near to God.


Even when "follow me" has the tone of instruction, it is always Jesus inviting people to join him so he can show them something, something that he knows they've been looking for. In fact, Jesus is also inviting them to see what God is looking for: them. Jesus came to save the world God loves, not to condemn it, and what Jesus wants us to see is that God loves. Accepting Jesus' invitation means we are choosing to see what Jesus shows us.



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This means we are also practicing commitment. At its root, to commit is to “bring together,” which is also the root for *commission*. When we follow Jesus, we bring ourselves together with his mission. The practice of accepting Jesus’ invitation takes a lifetime because we are continually learning what Jesus’ mission is.

As we learn in the Bible, following Jesus has real consequences. A life of authentic discipleship will not make one rich or popular, despite what prosperity preachers promise. Those who most eagerly flocked to hear Jesus and follow him were those left aside and pushed aside—the poor, the sick, the captives, the enslaved—by a complicity of political and religious authorities. Yet even those who had nothing to gain monetarily realized he spoke the truth, transformed lives, and offered a vision of God’s desire to reconcile the world and save it.

## FOLLOW WITH THE COMMUNITY OF OTHER DISCIPLES

Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher, and, in the tradition in which Jesus was steeped, one learned and followed *as a people*, not as individuals or even a collection of individuals. In the United States, salvation has become understood very often as strictly individual in nature. But if we take the biblical texts seriously, there is no saving of one without saving all people. In the mind and imaginations of Jesus’ Jewish disciples, then, there was no other way to follow Jesus than *as community*. We cannot be disciples of Jesus by ourselves apart from others.

Following Jesus as a community isn’t just what God wants, it’s what God wants *for us*. Ephesians 4 provides us with a helpful image, reminding us that being community, being *a people*, comprises relationships. Here, it’s not just that we are the body of Christ, but that maturity of the body is attained when all parts are working properly with one another.

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

—Ephesians 4:11–16

It’s like watching a toddler learn to walk and then succeed. There is much stumbling when that little one starts to stand up, and then stumbling when they start to take steps. Then, when they have learned to take just a few steps, they continue to learn how to keep balance. By the time they are walking with confidence, their brains, muscles, ligaments, and autonomy have gotten to the point where each is working well, and each is working well with the others. Solid walking isn’t achieved when the muscles are strong enough, or when the brain knows what it wants to do. Walking well happens when the parts are working well in concert. We are to help one another mature and grow as disciples, practicing together.



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Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

—Deuteronomy 6:4–9

Part of following Jesus with other disciples is teaching one another, listening to one another, and learning. But not just learning in order to memorize Bible verses and rules. Keeping God's commands in our hearts means learning them *by heart*, which we can see in the above quotation from Deuteronomy (known as the *Shema*) is a practice of reciting, discussing, binding, and fixing on the hands, forehead, and doorposts so that we see God's commands day and night, in front of us, and carry them with us wherever we go. They would not have been carrying these commands around, written on a piece of paper or vellum, much less in a note on their smartphones. From the beginning, this was *oral* and *aural* learning, listening and speaking to one another to pass on the commandments from the God of love. Conversation in this regard is practice of our love for God! This way of learning teaches us to love and follow God and to love and count on one another. Isn't it marvelous that, after Christ's resurrection in Luke 24, the disciples are together when he appears to them?

## LEARN TO SEE EVERYTHING THROUGH THE LENS OF LOVE

Jesus provides us with a vital moment of teaching when he teaches us what is sometimes called “the rule of love” or “the law of love.” Is there a particular instrument, like a compass on a sailboat, that will help us orient ourselves to following Jesus?

Providentially, yes.

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

—Mark 12:28–34

This clarifies why Jesus got into conversations about how to follow Sabbath laws. Too often, religious discussions fell into arguments about

trivial legalities of particular rules. Instead of the legalism of the Pharisees, Jesus reminded people of the point of all rules—to love God and to love one another. If there's not to be work on the Sabbath, should someone pull an animal out of a hole if it falls into one? Yes—because the Sabbath call is to prosper the life of all. These two greatest commandments are, as Jesus teaches them, the fertile ground in which discipleship is rooted. They also help us understand how to fulfill God's laws in such a way that we are following God, the lawgiver, and not just obeying the rules of the law. This means leaving behind rules and laws as ways of measuring faithfulness. Paul writes that "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8:1). Knowledge doesn't necessarily imply or lead to faithfulness. Knowledge that takes shape as love of others is faithfulness to God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus' life and teaching were all about showing how to love others. We are to learn from him and practice this as well. Jesus healed in different ways, fed people, showed up, spoke up, and constantly crossed boundaries and walls that divided people from loving one another. He showed us that serving "the least of these" is living in fellowship with God. Jesus had knowledge of Nathanael, which allowed him to reach Nathanael in a very personal way. Nathanael was *known*. Following Jesus, we need to understand and grasp what a person's needs are, how they are best met in a particular situation, and how we can serve them. This is gained through discernment, the transformation of our whole selves by the renewing of our minds as we offer our lives to God (see Romans 12:2).

Following Jesus, we follow the Divine Imagination of a new heaven and a new earth as we read about it in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament. That vision must be kept in front of us, always being deepened and corrected (like learning the commandments in Deuteronomy 6). Jesus brings God's justice and love into situations that are unjust and cruel. This, in turn, means we practice following Jesus by going more deeply into the world instead of avoiding it, for Jesus came to save it. We become a disciple by becoming one who loves the world that God loves. Following Jesus is not a ticket out of the world, it is a path ever more deeply into the world God created and cares deeply about saving.


## FOLLOW JESUS IN THE MAKING OF DISCIPLES

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says that God so loves *the world*. That's the *entire* world. Not just one particular group and not just people who get everything right. The Great Commission that we read about in Matthew 28:18–20 is not about conquering the world for Jesus or saving souls for Jesus. It is not about recruiting more and more people to join our numbers. It is about us playing the role of Philip who says to Nathanael, "Come and see."



And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

—Matthew 28:18–19


Isn't it interesting that Jesus tells us to follow him by sending us out? Isn't it amazing that Jesus instructs us to join him in his work in God's world? This is what a *commission* is: to join ourselves to the mission of another. In this instruction, the risen Jesus Christ also joins himself to us



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in such a way that he can be present to the entire world through us. We are called to share in Christ's mission *because* we are his disciples.

As we read the Great Commission in the Gospel of Matthew, we are reminded of what we observed at the beginning of this essay: that accepting Jesus' invitation is, at the same time, a commitment and reorientation of our lives to Jesus. We mentioned that accepting Jesus' invitation is something we do over and over again because we accept the invitation only with our whole lives. Here, in the Great Commission, the disciples are invited again to follow Jesus, again to receive and accept his call. It would seem that Jesus wants all people throughout the world to have someone say, "I have met the One you have been searching for—come and see." And, if we follow Jesus into God's reconciled world of fellowship, we are inviting others to join in fellowship.

We say "come and see" in a lot of ways. One of these is by teaching folks to obey everything that Jesus has commanded us. We need to remind ourselves that discipleship is a reorientation of life, not a mindless decision to be a robot. Obedience here does not in any way mean to "fall in line." The Greek word in the text is *tereo*, which means to observe or keep. This might remind us of the language in Deuteronomy that tells us to learn these commandments by heart, and to do so through conversation with one another. It follows, then, that the making of disciples as we read about it here is not only about community, it requires both the living and the teaching.


How, otherwise, would we pass on the call to see everything through the lens of love? How, otherwise, would we pass on the "rule of love" of the two greatest commandments of loving God and neighbor as self? God is love, and God's love for us and for the world entails relationships of love. We follow Jesus' discourse with the legal expert by having the same discourse with others, and by living in such a way that it is clear we have been formed by God's way of love. In a very real sense, we make disciples by loving people.

The astonishing thing about accepting Jesus' invitation, following him in community with other disciples, learning to see the world through the lens of love, and making disciples is that we find ourselves in that restored fellowship of reconciliation that God is working in heaven and earth, the fellowship about which Jesus says, "Come and see." The end, or goal, of all this work and practice isn't to complete a list of tasks so much as it is to exist in an ongoing community of love. And we know this is what Jesus himself wants, because he says it:

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."  
—Matthew 28:20

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Michelle J. Bartel** is a writer, theologian, and pastor who is eager to engage with issues surrounding how we live out our faith. After growing up in rural upstate New York, she graduated from Calvin College (now University) with a BA and from Princeton Theological Seminary with a MDiv and a PhD in theological ethics. She lives finding connections between popular culture and theology and continually focuses on joy as the core of deepening faith.



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