

Practicing the Way

Be with Jesus
Become like him
Do as he did

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New York Times bestseller

From the author of **The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry**

Practicing the Way—

Apprentice to Jesus



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.” 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 Testa-

ment 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 Burkheimer’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.) Burkheimer 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 am-

biguity 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.