

Message: Where Are You?

Do you follow Jesus?

I know. It’s a surprising question. In fact, you probably either automatically answered “yes” or else skipped right over it. You’re sitting there thinking “where’s he going?” Let’s rewind. It’s the most important question you will ever answer. I’ll ask again.

Do you follow Jesus?

We’ve heard the question before. We’re familiar with it, in the same way we’re familiar with Sunday School classes. You know, when in doubt, the answer is “Jesus.” The question doesn’t really connect or hold us to anything, even a response. It seems redundant.

Most likely, you’re serious about your faith.

For example, you probably shop in the Christian section in the store. So, when I ask “do you follow Jesus?” it’s like walking into Dodger stadium this week and asking, “are you a Dodgers fan?” It’s an important question, but you’re so sure of your answer that your mind dismisses it. Done. Signed, sealed and delivered.

Let me clarify what I’m not asking. “I’m not asking:

- Do you go to church? Did you join a church?
- Are your parents or grandparents Christian?
- Did you ever repeat a prayer after a pastor?
- Did you ever walk forward after an altar call?
- Do you own more than one Bible?
- Is one of your ringtones a worship song?
- Have you ever appeared in a church directory?
- Do you know more than three names for God?

I can keep going. Yep.

- Have you ever worn ‘witness wear’?
- Does your Facebook page say ‘Christ follower’?
- Have you read the Purpose Driven Life over 40 days?
- Do you understand phrases like ‘traveling mercies’, ‘hermeneutics’ or ‘prevenient grace’?”¹

¹ Kyle Idleman, *not a fan.*, Zondervan, 2014, p.20 (modified)

Here’s the point: many of us are quick to say, “yes, I follow Jesus,” but I’m not sure we really understand what we’re saying. To quote Inigo Montoya, “I do not think that means what you think it means.”² Two points if you got the reference to *The Princess Bride*.

Why does it matter?

One of the most challenging passages of Scripture is found in Matthew 7:21-23, when Jesus said, *“Knowing the correct password - saying ‘Master, Master,’ for instance - isn’t going to get you anywhere with me. What is required is serious obedience - doing what my Father wills. I can see it now - at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, ‘Master, we preached the Message, we bashed the demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.’ And do you know what I am going to say? ‘You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don’t impress me one bit. You’re out of here.’”* (The Message).

Did you hear the shift? Jesus tells us we’re more likely to be his fans, than his followers.

Being a fan is normal. We all admire certain people and have interests that appeal to us. The Cambridge English dictionary defines a fan as, simply, an admirer. Specifically, a fan is “a person who is very interested in a person or group, so they spend a lot of time watching or reading about them.”³

Most of us are fans of someone or something, whether we want to admit it or not. There are a few simple ways we can check. One is to look up what programs you’re recording on your home DVR. A second is to admit to following Twitter feeds or blogs. If you’re old school, we’d look to see what authors’ books, CDs or DVDs you have on your shelf. Maybe you’re keeping tabs on someone on Facebook.

The term “fan” is actually derived from the word “fanatic.” When we hear that phrase, a different picture comes to mind. We don’t think of regular people with a healthy admiration. We think of those who take

² *Ibid*

³ <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/fan>

an unhealthy approach. In their zeal, their admiration turns into self-interest. Rather than thinking about others, they become focused on their own needs and desires. Without correction, this can lead to intrusive, violent or self-destructive behaviors. We’ve all heard stories about riots at soccer matches, stampedes at concerts and stalkers who invade homes and lives, and, sadly, those who go into public venues and shoot people. There are cases where people have changed their bodies, the way they dress, speak and act in order to imitate celebrities. If a person loses their identity in their zeal, then it’s not healthy.

Does this make you wonder whether you’re a fan or a fanatic?

Rest assured, I don’t think anyone here is ready for a padded room. But you might consider this: in the TV shows you watch, what do you know about the characters and what do you know about the actors? If your coffee break conversations are about characters more often, then perhaps you’re slipping more to the unreal side of fandom.

The same thing applies to our view of Jesus. We may know a lot about Jesus. Maybe you can recite Bible verses like no one else. Perhaps you can name all of the books of the Bible. You might even teach others about Jesus. Those aren’t bad things, but any fan can do that. Fans know all about the characters, places and events of the Bible.

Nicodemus was like that. Nicodemus was a business man and a lay leader in the temple. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, which is like a church council. Nicodemus heard about Jesus. He wanted to know more. Here’s some background on him. Nicodemus attended Hebrew school from the age of three. He memorized the first five books of the Bible. He publically led worship. But Nicodemus was a fan. John tells us that in his letter. We read it earlier (John 3:1-10).

We know Nicodemus was a fan because he came to Jesus at night.

Nicodemus knew Jesus was alone. He wanted to come when no one else would know, because the risk was high. If any of his friends, family, co-workers or council members heard about his visit, Nicodemus would be in trouble. It could cost him his job, income, friends, home, livelihood.

Jesus knew Nicodemus’ situation. He didn’t call him on it. But he did challenge Nicodemus’ commitment to God saying, *“You’re a teacher of*

Israel, yet you don't understand [spiritual] things?” (v10). Then Jesus told Nicodemus his purpose, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (vv16-17).

Meeting Jesus made a difference in Nicodemus' life. He changes each time he appears in John's gospel. The first time is at night, as a fan. The second time was in the temple when he defended Jesus from false accusations. Nicodemus knew the risk, yet he stood up for Jesus in public. And he was put down for it (John 7:50-52). The final time, Nicodemus was all in. He joined Joseph of Arimathea at the cross and helped him to take the body of Jesus down. John tells us Nicodemus brought seventy-five pounds of aloe and myrrh, which cost a lot of money. The two men wrapped Jesus in linen cloths with the spices and laid him in the tomb (John 19:38-40). Everyone knew.

Nicodemus went from being a fan to being a follower. He moved beyond “hearing about Jesus” to having a relationship with Jesus to having a commitment and dedication so strong that he risked his life, career and home. He answered the question, “are you a follower of Jesus?” with a resounding “yes!”

So, what's the difference between a fan of Jesus and a follower of Jesus? One word: relationship. A follower of Jesus is someone who's in a relationship with Jesus. Not only that, it's an exclusive relationship.

It may be hard for some of to go back that far, but think back to when you were dating. If you're dating now, think about the last time you went on a good date. Dating can be fun. There are smiles, laughter and engaging conversation. You enjoy being with each other. In former days, it was called courting. You look forward to your next date. You prepare for it.

But, one day, things change.

The tenor of the conversation changes. You hear those chilling words, “let's talk about our relationship.” This person whose company you enjoy, whose presence you seek, wants to know where things are going.

The word “commitment” may even be used. Yeah, you can continue to have fun, enjoy each other’s company, laugh and live life.

But you have to make a decision. You have to answer the question, “am I ready to be in a committed relationship?” You can put off answering for a while, but things will change. The highs won’t be so high. The laughter won’t be quite as free. The smiles will come less often. You’re the same people, but there’s something between the two of you that is unmet, unfulfilled.

The relationship will strengthen and grow or it will weaken and diminish.

Where are you in your relationship with Jesus? That’s the question we’ll explore together over the next five weeks. It’s the most important question you’ll ever answer. But it’s worth it. A life lived fully with passion and love is the reward. The greatest benefit of all: the love of Christ, which overcomes everything, even death itself. I don’t know about you, but eternal life in heaven sounds pretty good to me.

Let us pray...

Fill us with your Spirit, the spirit of love and truth. Show us how to forgive each other. Help us to find meaning and purpose by trusting you. Lord, you made us to be in relationship with you and with each other. Give us hearts ready to accept your saving grace. We pray this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

John 3:1-10 (NRSV)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

Luke 9:23-24 (NRSV)

Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.