

Message: Don’t be a “Flexitarian”¹

Denial is not a river in Egypt.

Sorry, I know it’s a bad joke. Bringing humor into our conversation about what it means to be a follower of Christ is important. When we follow Jesus, we do so with joy in our hearts, not fear. It’s not work. We’re on a spiritual journey. It’s the trip from fan to follower. And, as we travel, we’re learning to identify the ways we’re still a fan inside, even as we’re becoming a more committed follower.

We’ve spent time looking at the encounters people have with Jesus.

Jesus has a knack for putting people in a position where they have to define their relationship with him. Is it casual or committed? Too often, we’re admirers, not followers. Fans want a relationship with Jesus. The problem is that fans want a relationship with him on *their* terms.

The question we need to ask is: what kind of relationship does Jesus want to have with us? Those are the terms that matter. What Jesus says about the relationship is what makes fans into followers. That shift in our perspective makes all the difference.

Here’s a simple way to illustrate the shift.

Can you recite John 3:16? It’s a great verse that reveals a beautiful truth. There’s a reason we like it. The whole of Jesus’ message is revealed in this one verse. God loves us. Jesus came for us. We can have eternal life through him, free from condemnation. We see it on bumper stickers or on street corners. You can go to a ball game and see someone holding up a sign that says “John 3:16.”

What you don’t see is someone holding up a sign that says “Luke 9:23.” Can you recite that verse? It also records Jesus’ words, “*All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me.*” It doesn’t have the same appeal. In fact, it can make it difficult to invite people to know Jesus. But the truth is the two sayings have to go together for us to have a full understanding of Jesus’ invitation.

¹ Kyle Idleman, *not a fan.*, Zondervan, 2014, p. 147

John 3:16 is about believing. Luke 9:23 is about following.

There is no believing without following.

Jesus isn't talking about following the rules. He's talking about being in a deep relationship with him. It's the kind of relationship where you make a lifelong commitment, like a marriage.

I love weddings. They're a time of joy. There's a sense of fulfillment coupled with a new beginning. During our engagement to “the one,” we've had to learn about each other and had the experience of preparing for a life-changing event, the wedding. It's been a time of growth. Some get a little nervous because they realize what commitment means and know that the time of admiration and infatuation will pass. A new life lies ahead.

We profess our desire to commit to marriage. The traditional vows say it well, *“In the name of God and with a thankful heart, we declare our love ... to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.”*² This is the solemn vow we make before God to each other. We make it and in front of our family, friends and loved ones. Life is filled with hope. There's a new depth and confidence. We can't see what the future will bring, but we aren't alone. We have a partner to share it with us. That's very comforting. We feel loved.

That's the commitment Jesus wants from us. In fact, that's the reason the church is called the bride of Christ. Jesus is our partner in all aspects of life. Marriages based on a relationship with Christ are strong. That's because each person knows that Jesus will teach them the way to love. We don't know how to love when unexpected things happen, but that's okay. We'll learn together as we go.

What's important is that we don't hold onto anything from the past. Our old selves, our old relationships are gone. Our new selves, our new relationship is all that matters. Going back is never a good idea. For example, getting in touch with that old, high school flame via Facebook

² 1992 Book of Worship, pp. 135-150

is dangerous. You tell yourself that you're just touching base. But, after a while, you find yourself sharing secrets, complaints about your spouse, the kids and the job. You remember the good ol' times. That's a recipe for adultery, divorce and broken relationships. I encourage you to resist.

The same thing is true with Jesus. We're all welcome to come to Jesus. There's no approval process or qualifications. We can shed our old selves and become new. There's nothing you've done that Jesus doesn't know about. He loves you, no matter what! Your sexual past doesn't matter. Ex-con or current con? Doesn't matter. Recently divorced? Doesn't matter. Republican or Democrat? Doesn't matter. Alcoholic or addict? Doesn't matter. Killer? Doesn't matter. Atheist or Satanist? Doesn't matter. Hypocrite? Doesn't matter. Anyone can come to Jesus, be accepted and loved, and become a follower.

What are you holding onto?

Maybe you're like the young man Jesus met one day on the road. *“...he asked, ‘Good Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’”*

The young man gets credit for asking a good question. But he's asking like a fan. The phrase *“good thing I must do”* can be translated as the good thing I must *“acquire”* or *“earn.”* He thinks a good resume is going to get him in.

I love the way Mark records the encounter, *“Jesus looked him hard in the eye - and loved him! He said, ‘There's one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow me.’”*

Jesus saw right to the heart of things. This isn't a story that's only about money. It's about whatever holds us back from following Jesus with all our heart. Jesus saw that wealth was what limited that man. Still, Jesus loved him. And Jesus invited him to follow.

How will you respond when Jesus invites you to follow?

Mark tells us, *“The man's face clouded over. It was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked away with a heavy heart. He was holding tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go.”*

Letting go requires total surrender. We can’t compartmentalize our lives and say, “Well, I’ll give Sunday mornings [or another worship time] to Jesus ... so long as I don’t have _____ that conflicts.” We can’t say, “I follow Jesus ... but in these areas, I do things my way.” I’m not saying we’ll live perfectly or that we won’t have unavoidable conflicts. What I’m saying is we can’t say, “I follow Jesus” and then refuse to follow when it comes to certain people, places or practices.

That would be like being one of the new vegetarians. They eat vegetarian and identify themselves as vegetarian, with one exception: they eat bacon. In other words, they don’t eat meat, unless they really like it. As you can imagine, the real vegetarians aren’t too happy about it. So, after some pressure, the new group came up with a new name. They’re “flexitarians.”³ They refuse to eat meat, unless they like what’s being served. Or, as one member put it, “I really like being a vegetarian. I’m just not 100% committed to it.”

Flexitarian is a good way to describe the way some people approach their commitment to Jesus. They say, “I really love Jesus – but I don’t really like serving the poor. I really love Jesus – but I’m not into the idea of going to church. I really love Jesus – but my resources and time are spoken for. I really love Jesus – but don’t ask me to save sex for marriage. I really love Jesus – but don’t ask me to forgive the person who hurt me. I really love Jesus but I’m not 100% committed.” So, when bacon is on the menu, their commitments can be adjusted.

Following Jesus requires a complete and total commitment.

We have to surrender. What the wealthy young man is really committed to is revealed when he refuses to deny himself. He wanted to say yes to following Jesus without saying no to himself. He wanted to be close enough to Jesus to have eternal life, but not so close that it required personal sacrifice.

Following Jesus isn’t just about giving up money and the things money can buy. It’s about giving up, *period*. It’s about surrendering whatever holds you back and entering into a new life. It about a new

³ Kyle Idleman, *not a fan.*, Zondervan, 2014, p. 147

beginning, filled with hope for the future together. It’s about freely and willingly making a vow to love, honor and cherish Jesus above all others. That’s what it means to deny yourself and follow Christ.

Are you ready to follow Jesus?

Let us pray...

Gracious God, we come wanting to follow you. We want all of the good things that come by your grace, yet we think we can earn our way. Fill us with a spirit of love, truth and give us the courage to choose you over all others. Give us the courage to admit those things that distract us. Show us how to truly follow you, no matter what it may cost. Jesus, we pray this in your name. Amen.

Luke 9:23-24 (CEB)

Jesus said to everyone, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will save them.”

Matthew 19:16-22 (CEB)

A man approached him and said, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?”

Jesus said, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There’s only one who is good. If you want to enter eternal life, keep the commandments.”

The man said, “Which ones?”

Then Jesus said, “*Don’t commit murder. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t steal. Don’t give false testimony. Honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.*”

The young man replied, “I’ve kept all these. What am I still missing?”

Jesus said, “If you want to be complete, go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come follow me.”

But when the young man heard this, he went away saddened, because he had many possessions.