**Faith in a Batman Shirt**

A preacher ran into a guy from his church who he hadn’t seen for a while. Wanting to mess with his friend just a bit so he said, *You know, you should be serving in the Lord’s army*.

* Guy: *I already serve in the army of the Lord*.
* Preacher: *Then why do we only see you a couple times each year*?
* Guy: *I’m in the secret service*.

Do you ever wonder about guys who claim the name of Jesus but don’t participate in a church? Going to church is not the essence of Christianity, but not going to church certainly indicates that something’s wrong in a guy’s faith.

Audience participation question: You’re all people who go to church. That suggests that you are Christian. Other than that you go to church, what do you point to show that you’re a Christian?

It’s a trick question. If you’re a Christian you don’t have to point to anything to prove it. People can see it in the way you live and the way you talk. If you have to point it out, there’s a problem somewhere.

We’re about to launch into a series of sermons about what it means to be a Christian, but our attention will not be directed to the word “Christian”. Rather we’ll look at the word “disciple” and its cognate “discipleship”. I’ll explain the difference.

By definition a Christian is one who believes Jesus, and believes in Jesus. A Christian accepts that Jesus is the Son of God, that He died for our sins, and He was raised to life by God. We say things like, *Accept Jesus into your heart*, or *Receive Him as Lord and Savior*. These aren’t wrong, in fact they’re quite descriptive of what it means to become a Christian.

We have however, made a very subtle change from the New Testament. In the New Testament followers of Jesus were primarily called disciples. “Christian” is rarely used in the New Testament. The first recorded time the word “Christian” was used of Jesus followers is in Acts 11:26. *The disciples were called* Χριστιανους(*Christians*) *first at Antioch.*

* King Agrippa used Χριστιανος when Paul was on trial, *Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a* Χριστιανος*?”* Acts 26:28

It was more of a nickname than a description. They supposed that Christ was Jesus’ last name rather than His title. It’s not a bad thing. I like being known by that name. To me it’s a badge of honor to be so known.

It was a while before Jesus’ followers called themselves Christians.

* The only Biblical reference comes in the early 60’s AD. Peter, writing to encourage persecuted Jesus followers wrote, *If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a* Χριστιανος*, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.* 1 Peter 4:15f

Calling ourselves Christians is more user friendly than calling ourselves disciples because the noun “Christian” doesn’t imply anything about how we live. This is especially true in our culture where “Christian” has degenerated to mean only that one identifies with Christ as opposed to Allah or Buddha or some other false god.

Today people call themselves “Christian” without any semblance of a Christian lifestyle.

* Hateful people like Westboro Baptist Church identify as Christian.
* Preachers like Rob Bell, who deny the righteous standards of the New Testament call themselves Christian.
* A potential Presidential candidate calls himself Christian saying, *I try to live a life that is consistent with Christian teachings…I believe in (the) Christian ethic* (Pete Buttigieg) all the while living a lifestyle clearly condemned in the Word of God as sinful.

We want you to continue using the word “Christian”. It’s a good word, but we want you to think of yourself as a disciple of Christ. In this series we’re going to talk about what is involved in being a disciple as opposed to simply being a believer. This is important because it’s almost epidemic in the American church that the essence of faith stops at believing.

We love scriptures like…

* Romans 3:22, *Righteousness of God comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to all who believe*.
* And Ephesians 2:8f, *it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.*

You can’t go wrong with that – unless you stop reading right there because Paul continued his teaching about what it means to be a Christian with this, *For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Ephesians 2:10

God never intended for His people to stop at believing. Genuine faith leads to behavior changes in which we do good works. By His choice God determined that people who believe Him will be saved, and with that those who believe in Him should do His will.

You’re probably familiar with “*The Sermon on the Mount*” found in Matthew 5-7. This sermon by Jesus forecasted what He would teach throughout His ministry. Near the end of His teaching He said,

* *Not everyone who calls me Lord will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven*. Matthew 7:21
* He also asked in a similar sermon, *Why do you call me Lord and not do what I say?* Luke 6:46

According to Jesus a disciple is more than a believer. He or she is a follower. A disciple of Christ does more than believe in Jesus. He or she follows and obeys Jesus.

There is a myriad of definitions for disciple. Probably every one includes two elements:

* To learn from a teacher.
* To bear living witness to that teacher by following his or her example.

Doc. Strauss used to say *“a disciple is a witnessing learner*”.

As Gautama Buddha was dying, his disciples asked him what they could best do to remember him. He told them don’t bother. What matters is not that they remember him but that they remember his teaching. Christian faith is the other way around. It’s about remembering Jesus. It about His person: knowing Him, loving Him, believing Him, and following Him.

James wrote, *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that, and they shudder.* James 2:19*is person, H* A Christian knows what Jesus taught and believes it. A disciple becomes what Jesus is.

Someone described being a disciple this way: "*Discipleship is the process of becoming who Jesus would be if He were you*."

Whereas the word “Christian” was used of Jesus’ followers only three times in the New Testament, “disciple” was used 262 times.

Nowhere does Jesus or any of the Apostles give a definitive statement on the essence of discipleship. Not because it lacked gravity but because they didn’t have to. It was natural for people who trusted Jesus to become disciples.

We’re going to look at different facets of a disciple. It’ll be like looking at a diamond from different angles. It’s the same stone but each facet adds to the wholeness of the precious gem. Whether it’s loving Jesus or being engaged with the body of Christ, pursuing holiness or being a trusted steward, each facet will bring out more of the wholeness of what it means to be a disciple.

To help you understand discipleship, here are three essential qualities of being a disciple of Jesus.

**One:** A disciple is never a finished product. Rather **a disciple grows**.

Peter wrote his letters to encourage and strengthen Jesus followers who were experiencing terrible persecution from both the Jews and the Romans. Reminding them of what the Old Testament prophets said as well as the teaching of Jesus, and looking ahead to the end time when Jesus returns, he finished his correspondence saying don’t let anyone lead you astray with feel-good religion…but *grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.* 2 Peter 3:18

Αυξανω means to grow in a natural sense like the tree in front of our building that started from a seed into this large fruit producing oak. Peter is saying, while faith starts with simply accepting Jesus, it grows in understanding Jesus and becoming more and more like Jesus, showing more of His grace and gaining more knowledge of Himself? A disciple grows.

**Two:** A disciple doesn’t grow by accident. **A disciple grows by virtue of training**.

Writing to his protégé Timothy Paul told him, *Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.* 1 Timothy 4:7

Let’s take that apart.

*Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales.* Γραωδης refers to the things old women would tell to children, many of which had no basic in reality. Μυθος translated myths or legends refers to man-made ideas as opposed to what God has revealed. He tells Timothy to stay away from these as they will affect his theology.

In contrast he says, *train yourself to be godly*. Train yourself is an interesting word.

Γυμναζω comes from a word that means naked. In Greek athletic competition competitors were naked. The didn’t have Under Armour so they took off clothing that might slow them down or otherwise affect their performance. Γυμναζω then means to train like an athlete.

Think of it this way: he urged Timothy, and us, to holy sweat. Spiritually speaking, if a man is free from every what hinders growth (Hebrews 12:1), certain friends, habits, and pastimes that impede godliness, he can grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord.

A disciple eliminates whatever hinders growing in Christ so that he can work at growing. In 1 Corinthians Paul described his own personal effort to grow using words like: run, strive (αγωνιζω), combat. These are all competitive athletic terms. They’re all intentional and require effort. In his charge to Timothy he referred to himself as laboring and striving.

Labor is energetic work to the point of exhaustion, and striving preserves the idea of the athlete leaving everything on field of competition.

Are you getting the picture? A disciple is someone who works hard with a definite plan for growth.

**Three:** a disciple grows by virtue of training. Also, **A disciple maintains growth**.

I can’t give you a specific scripture for this quality of being a disciple so this one is free. If you don’t trust my wisdom on this you don’t have to listen.

My truck has about 160K miles on it. Tony assures me that if I maintain that truck I could easily see another 100k miles. I’d love to buy a new truck but we can’t afford it right now. So I get the oil changed regularly. I have issues fixed as soon as I can upon discovery. (Maybe when I get to 200k I’ll get one of those medallions for the grille that says 200K miles.)

The point is that for anything to last requires maintenance. That’s true of our vehicles, our houses, our tools. Everything requires maintenance.

That’s also key in your spiritual life. Becoming and being a disciple of Jesus is not a one-time event. Yes you got saved, but that doesn’t mean you now coast until the second coming of Christ. Spiritual vitality, just like physical vitality, is the result of adequate and proper nourishment, exercise, and rest.

How many people are familiar with Francis Chan? Of his 71 books his most well-known is Crazy Love. Chan served as preacher at Cornerstone Community Church in Simi Valley, CA for about 16 years until he became disillusioned with the lack of discipleship in the church. He struggled with the idea of 5000 people sitting in the church each week to watch him do his thing, but they were 5000 people not doing their thing.

Perhaps we could have seen his resignation coming when he shared this illustration:

Chan said, many churches instead of encouraging people to do what Jesus did, tell people to memorize what He said. Jesus said, *Go 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 I have commanded you*. Matthew 28:19f

We can do that. Say it with me: *Go 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 I have commanded you.* Now we can all celebrate. We got it right, word for word.

Chan then offered this: Imagine you say to your son – *Go clean your room*.

* Gone for an hour
* *Dad, I memorized what you said. How’s this.* *You said, Go clean your room*.
* A great celebration follows. You hug him and tell him how proud you are.
* *You got it right son. Word for word*.

But then:

* *Oh Dad, I can even say it in Greek* – 
* *That’s awesome, son!*
* *Even better Dad, I’ve got some friends coming over and we’re going to have a study group about what it would look like if I cleaned my room, with discussion questions and more memorization.*

Chan said that the most destructive heresy in the church today is when we say you can be a Christian and not be a disciple of Jesus Christ; not truly follow Jesus. Let’s go back and look at the Great Commission: *Go and make Christians of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

Do you see the problem?

* He didn’t say, *Go make Christians* did He?
* He said, *Go make disciples*
* Making disciples includes *baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*
* There’s more. Making disciples includes *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*.
* *Teaching them to obey!*

This is important friends. A Christian is not simply someone who said *The Sinners Prayer* and received Jesus into his heart. A Christian is a disciple of Jesus…

* one with a supreme love for Jesus,
* one who denies himself and accepts the way of the cross in his own life.
* one who spends his life following Jesus, fervently loving those who belong to Jesus.
* One who holds without distraction to the Word of God
* and one who has the discipline to abandon material concerns for the sake of the Gospel.

Do you remember Mike Singletary? Perennial All-Pro; two-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year; member of the 1985 Bears Dream Team; known for wide-eyed intensity and total concentration of the game. Remember seeing the images of his eyes reading the offense before the play, ready to react to what he saw with one of his crushing hits?

Do you know that giant linebacker is only about 6’ tall and 220#? Not an imposing figure, except for his total dedication to be the best at what he does.

Ernest Hemmingway was a booze hound who for the last 27 years of his life drank a quart of whiskey every day. He also was a great writer who would labor for hours to get a single sentence just right. He wrote and re-wrote the conclusion to *A Farewell to Arms* 17 times. In his last days he worked from 6:30am ‘till noon to write two pages, 500 words.

Winston Churchill was anything but a natural orator. He had a lisp that made him the butt of many jokes, still he was proclaimed by many to be the speaker of the century.

He wrote everything out and practiced out loud, even choreographed pauses and pretending to fumble for the right words. His manuscripts reveal he anticipated cheering standing ovations.

These men, and there are many other examples we could recite, were the best at their craft because they trained and maintained. The people you know who are relentless disciples of Jesus don’t get that way by accident. They train to be godly and the work to maintain godliness.

Theologians use a term “prevenient grace”. I’m not a theologian, I’m a preacher so I don’t have to use it. Prevenient grace means that before you can seek God, God must first have sought you. We pursue God because, and only because God has first put an urge within us that moves us to know Him.

Jesus said, *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.* John 6:44 Your impulse to seek God originated from God. Your response to that impulse is discipleship. This isn’t a contradiction. God is always previous. Our response is to pursue Him.

This is what David sang in Psalm 42, *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.* Psalm 42:1

The doctrine of “justification by faith alone”, a wonderful Biblical truth has, in the words of A.W. Tozer “*fallen into evil company*.” By that he means that today faith can be exercised without moral implications. *Christ may be received without creating any special love for Him*. A man may be saved but have no hunger or thirst for Him.

The essence of discipleship is longing for personal intimate knowledge of God, what Tozer calls “*the throbbing heart of New Testament religion*”.

When we sing these songs in worship I encourage you to think carefully about what you’re saying. They express our desire to know God personally and consciously.

Sadly many have come to believe in Jesus but without a desire to grow in their knowledge of and relationship to Jesus. Oh, they come to church “religiously” but they lack a hunger and thirst to know and become like Jesus. They’re not phony. They simply haven’t a longing for personal intimate knowledge of God. They’re satisfied with having accepted Jesus.

This longing is the rebirth without which Jesus said, we cannot see the kingdom of God. This new birth is just the beginning of a life-long pursuit of Jesus.

We want to encourage a mighty longing after God. The lack of it makes for sterile churches. Complacency is a deadly enemy of spiritual growth. Our programs and classes and methods and services and organization – all of our activities that occupy time and attention can never satisfy the longing of the heart unless it be directed to knowing Jesus personally and intimately.

Our purpose for this series is that in your faith you would develop this longing for Jesus, and would pursue discipleship with the confidence of a four year old in a Batman shirt.

My prayer is that by the end of this series you will either be discomforted that you don’t know truly God personally and intimately, or you will hate us for preaching it.