

# LIVE LIKE A DISCIPLE

MATTHEW 28:19–20

A disciple is a follower. In his adult ministry, Jesus first appears as something of a disciple himself. Matthew's Gospel describes how he follows his relative John the Baptist, a prophet, into the Judean wilderness, where John is baptizing in the Jordan River (Matthew 3). Like other disciples of the prophet, Jesus listens to John's fiery preaching and wades into the water for baptism. But John recognizes Jesus as the one whom he is anticipating and proclaiming. Just who is following whom? After a time in the wilderness, Jesus emerges to call his own disciples, even while John continues his own itinerant preaching, now pointing clearly to Jesus. The one who followed John into the Jordan now has followers—or disciples—of his own.

From a secular point of view, a disciple is someone who has a strong interest in or admiration for a particular person or thing. The slang term *groupie*—a synonym for *disciple* in the secular world—lacks many of the key Christian components of discipleship, but it hints at the same devotion. Imagine a group of followers who trail a band from show to show. They have rearranged their lives in order to follow. The most devout will share some similarities. They have the same T-shirts. They know all the words to the songs. They can spend hours talking about the band and wait eagerly for the next concert. We see the same kind of devotion from fans who support sports teams, celebrities, authors, or online personalities.

Groupies will do almost anything to be near the person they admire. That urgency for proximity or connection with the person we admire is a helpful concept to add to the constellation of ideas that make up discipleship. We are disciples of Jesus because Jesus is so compelling. The stories he told, the way he lived, the love and grace he offers, the truth he embodies; we are drawn to him in ways we can't fully articulate. We may have to rearrange our lives in order to live as his disciple. Our



choices may seem strange to those who don't share our connection. But with those who are also disciples, we are at home.

Like the groupies who devoutly follow a band from show to show, those who follow Jesus share some similarities in the way we live. We may not all have matching T-shirts, but we hope people can tell we are with the band. Importantly, we share some similarities not only with one another, but with Jesus. From the earliest days, disciples of Jesus have tried to emulate and embody his life and teachings described in the Gospels. We also have models in the lives of the disciples who followed after Jesus described in the book of Acts and in the epistles. We'll explore some of these as our study progresses.

The English word *disciple* has its origins in the Latin word *discipulus*, which means pupil, student, or follower. The word *apostle* means one who is sent out as a messenger or missionary. We often use these terms interchangeably, particularly when speaking about the earliest followers of Jesus. When we consider the call to "make disciples," we may hold both ideas at the same time. In our study, we will primarily use the term *disciple* to cover both meanings, from the earliest followers on down to today.

➤ What words describe the way Jesus lived?

➤ What words describe the way the early disciples lived?

➤ What words describe the way disciples of Jesus live today?

Lord, help me live as your disciple. Open my ears to hear your call. Open my eyes so I can follow. Open my heart to those who walk this journey with me. Amen.

# FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

Being a disciple is a lifelong process and journey. It is much more than a club to join, pay dues, and get a membership card. Jesus called a variety of people, all imperfect, to follow him. Over time, they learned through making mistakes and learning from Jesus how to follow him better. We learn a number of things about living as a disciple from the Bible.



## MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCES

Matthew highlights some important events that occur on hills or mountains: the temptation of Jesus (4:8–11), the Sermon on the Mount (5–7), the Transfiguration (17:1–8), Jesus’ final discourse with his disciples (24–25). In each of these instances, Jesus and his followers have to leave the mountaintop and head back down into regular life. What they learn and experience on the mountain must be reflected in the way they live afterward.

- ✦ What have you learned in a *mountaintop experience* that has changed the way you live as a disciple?

## TAKING RISKS

Following Jesus has always been risky. Jesus asked people to leave their occupations and families to join his movement. There was no salary or benefit plan included. The passage we call the *Great Commission* has guided disciples for centuries. We sit up and pay attention because they are words that Jesus himself said. They are also the last words Jesus said to his disciples, according to Matthew. We might attribute some extra prominence to them because of this. Wouldn’t Jesus share his most important instructions before he left those who would carry on after him?

Matthew tells us that, after the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, the women went to the tomb. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary learned from an angel that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Their instructions were to go tell the other disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee. Along the way, the women met the risen Jesus and worshiped him. Having heard the news from the women, the eleven disciples who were left—all but Judas—gathered on a mountain in Galilee, where the risen Jesus also greeted them. Matthew tells us that, when they saw him, they worshiped and doubted. Jesus then gave them the Great Commission, and our guiding Scripture for this study. In each successive week, we will explore more of this instruction:

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. And remember, I am with you **always**, to the end of the age.”

—Matthew 28:18–20 (emphasis added)

Think about what that was like for those disciples as they made their way to the mountain at the end of Matthew’s Gospel. Their experience reflects our own as we try to live as faithful disciples. How do these statements about the first disciples connect with your own experience of being a follower of Jesus?

- They had been through trauma and grief.
- They set out to see Jesus based on the word of others.
- They weren’t exactly sure what they were getting into.
- Jesus met them just as he said he would.
- They worshiped and doubted.
- Jesus called them (even grieving, unsure, and doubting) into a life of discipleship.

## ALL THE ALLS

Look again at Matthew 28:18–20 and notice the four bolded words. They are all variations of the same word. Some Bible versions use the word *all* in all four instances. The New Revised Standard Version updated edition uses “everything” for the third instance, but it means the same thing.

- What do those phrases Jesus used tell you about the task of living like and making disciples?
- All authority
- All nations
- Everything I have commanded
- Always



# FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Seen from one perspective, there are as many ways to *Live Like a Disciple* as there are individual followers of Jesus. We might have similarities with those around us because of our language, culture, region, or background, but we each remain unique beings. Each of us lives out our faith in our own particular way. No one is a disciple exactly like you are, just as you cannot be a disciple exactly like someone else. The church has gotten in trouble in large and small ways when trying to spell out exactly what the lives of followers of Jesus look like. While that may appeal to those who voluntarily sign on for particular lifestyle choices, it becomes problematic when those choices are applied to all.

## DO THIS, NOT THAT

The Puritan Movement in the young American colonies is one example of how religious communities can turn the admirable goal of living like a disciple into an unfortunate weapon against dissenters. Though based on a desire for religious freedom to live a devout life, as religious and political laws became entangled, differences in belief became dangerous. Those who disagreed with the authorities about doctrine, practice, or race relations were at risk of excommunication, banishment, flogging, or death. At various times, laws existed banning activities such as Christmas celebrations, theater performances, boxing, dancing, and toasting one another's health. It was a short trip from behavioral laws like those to the persecution and execution of Quakers in the 1650s, and the Salem Witch Trials in 1692. The influence of Puritan laws around Sabbath observance have been much longer-lasting. It's one thing to read about a historical movement that seems long ago and far away. It's another to recognize the same strains of thought in our day.

## Lifestyle choices

In your lifetime, what lifestyle choices have you seen some communities of faith insist upon for their members that other communities of faith do not? List some choices of dress, food and drink, dating and marriage, sexuality, language, gender roles, daily routines, worship, work and play, and more.

- Do any of these resonate with you as the way a disciple should live?
- If so, where do you think that instinct or instruction comes from?
- Are there other disciples of Jesus who might disagree with you?
- What do you think matters to Jesus?



## KOINONIA—A FELLOWSHIP OF DISCIPLES

For centuries, groups of Christians have established intentional Christian communities in an attempt to live as disciples. One remarkable example in the United States is Koinonia Farm in rural Georgia. Founded in 1942 by two couples as a “demonstration plot for the kingdom of God,” the community set out to embody a gathering of disciples inspired by the earliest followers of Jesus. While sharing resources, and cultivating a thriving farm, the community also shared a commitment to racial equality and pacifism. This led to violent threats, boycotts, and acts of terrorism against the farm during the era of Jim Crow and the resistance for civil rights. The community suffered and survived. A new focus on the need for decent, affordable, local housing eventually birthed the organization of Habitat for Humanity, which now builds houses all over the world. Today, visitors to the farm can engage in worship, study, prayer, fellowship, and service in a multitude of ways.



The mission statement of Koinonia today says: “We are Christians called to live together in intentional community sharing a life of prayer, work, study, service and fellowship. We seek to embody peacemaking, sustainability, and radical sharing. While honoring people of all backgrounds and faiths, we strive to demonstrate the way of Jesus as an alternative to materialism, militarism and racism.”<sup>1</sup>

- ➔ If you were to write a mission statement for an intentional community of disciples, what would you write?

Learn more about Koinonia Farm at [www.koinoniafarm.org](http://www.koinoniafarm.org) or watch the YouTube video “A Glimpse of Koinonia Today” ([bit.ly/FMKoinoniaFarm](https://bit.ly/FMKoinoniaFarm), 3:00).

The Greek word *koinónia* (κοινωνία) means “fellowship” and includes the idea of holding or sharing resources or a bond in common as a partnership or community. It is used in the New Testament in descriptions of the early church, and translated with a variety of words and phrases. How do these passages where the Greek word *koinónia* is used deepen your understanding of living like a disciple?

- Acts 2:42—“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”
- Hebrews 13:16—“Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”
- Philippians 2:1–2—“If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”
- 2 Corinthians 13:13—“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

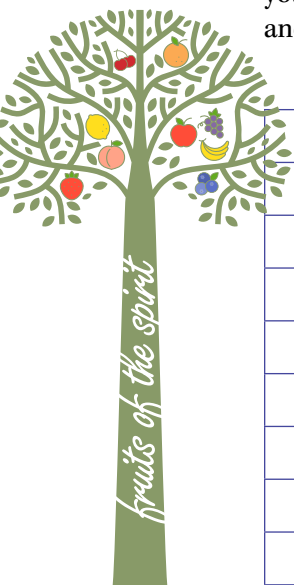
1. “Mission and Vision,” Koinonia Farm, [www.koinoniafarm.org/mission-vision](http://www.koinoniafarm.org/mission-vision).

# PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Disciples of Jesus Christ want to know how to follow him. You are working through this study because you want to live like a disciple. It would be helpful to have a definitive checklist of how to live like a disciple, wouldn't it? But who decides what is on the checklist? And can you imagine wanting to join a church fellowship but first having to sit with someone holding a checklist before they allow you to become part of their koinonia? Jesus didn't ask his disciples to measure up before inviting them to follow. He just said "Follow me," and taught them what living as a disciple meant as they went along the way. He invited them to belong before they even believed. In their time together, Jesus shared stories and teachings with the disciples about living as one who loves God. Their understanding of discipleship grew and developed and was never perfect. Perhaps part of living like a disciple is to keep seeking after it as a goal, to keep practicing.

## FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

One helpful image from Scripture to describe the life of a practicing disciple is that of fruit. A disciple is one whose life bears some fruit that reflects the character of Jesus. Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (John 15:16). Likewise, the apostle Paul uses the image of "fruit of the Spirit" to list nine admirable characteristics that show themselves in daily living in those who belong to Christ: "[T]he fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23). Recalling that Jesus didn't require a checklist or perfection, reflect on each of these characteristics in your life. When do these types of fruit blossom in your life? Which do you want to work on and how might you, in koinonia with the Spirit, cultivate more of them?



	Blossoms When	Ideas for Cultivating
Love		
Joy		
Peace		
Patience		
Kindness		
Generosity		
Faithfulness		
Gentleness		
Self-control		

## HIGHLIGHTS IN MY LIFE AS A DISCIPLE

Another revealing practice in understanding discipleship is to explore your own story: how you came to be with the band of believers who follow Jesus and where that has led you. What was your introduction into the community of believers? Who invited you? Who brought you? Who welcomed you? How did you come to feel like you belonged among those who call themselves disciples? Since you started as a follower of Jesus, where has your faith journey led you? Who and what are the people, places, and events that stand out in your life as a disciple so far? This could be a formal chronological faith story, or a simple list of significant moments in your faith journey.

Here are two possible ways to start:

1. List some memories that stand out: a mission trip, a conversation, a worship experience, a person of faith. Then, pick one and write more about it. Repeat with new memories if you like. Each of these have something to tell you about what it means for you to live like a disciple.
2. Draw a mind map of your life as a disciple so far. In the middle of the page, write the words “My life as a disciple.” Circle that. Now draw a line from the circle and add whatever comes to mind, perhaps the name of someone or a church community that welcomed you. Circle that. Draw more lines from each circle, and keep adding whatever springs to mind. Follow wherever your memory leads you.



## SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Spiritual practices are ways that disciples keep their lives as followers of Jesus front and center. They can also be ways that people explore living like a disciple before calling themselves a follower of Jesus. There is no exhaustive list of these either, but some are more common than others, like Bible reading, prayer, worship, and service. Other disciples find meaning in practices like walking a labyrinth, keeping a gratitude journal, creating art, practicing yoga, and so on. You can see more in other *Follow Me* units like the one called *Practice Spiritual Disciplines*.

- What spiritual practices are part of your life now?
- What practices are you interested in exploring?
- Which of these practices also draw people who don't yet call themselves disciples?





# FOLLOWING JESUS

# LIVE LIKE A DISCIPLE

The task of making disciples begins with understanding what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. While we can't create one list or picture that fully encapsulates what life as a disciple involves, we can learn—and keep learning—from Scripture, our communities of faith, and other disciples. Keep your eyes and ears open for new images and descriptions of what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus. You might hear something new in a Bible passage or in worship this week that adds to your understanding. You might discover a story or see a film or video about a person that shows them living as a disciple. You might be taking up a Lenten practice for these next weeks to help you live as a disciple in an intentional way. Ask God to show you what you need to know about being a disciple. This, all by itself, is a practice of being a disciple.

In our next session, we will return to the words of Jesus in the Great Commission. His friends have decided to keep living as his disciples, despite their own doubt and uncertainty. They have made the journey to where Jesus is waiting for them. On the mountain in Galilee, he tells them not to stay there in the safety of his presence, but to “Go . . .” As you embark on this study, be ready to hear Jesus tell you the same thing.

Watch the YouTube video “Hymn—Today We All Are Called to Be Disciples” ([bit.ly/FMCalled](https://bit.ly/FMCalled), 3:22). This, and many of our great hymns of faith, and our worship songs describe life as a disciple.

- What do you hear in some of your favorites or in the one above?