

Practicing the Way

Be with Jesus
Become like him
Do as he did

**John Mark
Comer**



New York Times bestselling author of
The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry

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My Name is Hope

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The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry

Live No Lies

Practicing the Way

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“Come, follow me.”

—Jesus, Mark 1v17

“May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi.”¹

—first-century Jewish blessing

Dust

Who are you following?

Everybody is following *somebody*—or at least something.

Put another way, we're all disciples.

The question isn't, Am I a disciple?

It's, *Who* or *what* am I a disciple of?

I know, I know; what I just said is akin to heresy in the modern world. We want *so* badly to believe that we—and we alone—plot our course, captain our ship, control our destiny. We aspire to lead, not to follow.

But, question: How is that working out for you?

Do you ever feel that nagging “thought” tug at the back of your mind: *Is the life I'm living the life I most deeply desire? Is this it?*

I was born and raised on the West Coast of America. It's an open secret that the US in general and my home state of California in particular are built on what sociologists call “the myth of the rugged individual.” Dr. Robert Bellah called it “radical individualism” and said it's the defining trait of America.²

And yet “no man is an island,” as the poet John Donne once said.³ And no woman is either. In the words of the *New York Times* col-

umnist Tish Harrison Warren, “None of us comes to what we believe by ourselves. *The world has no free thinkers.*”⁴

(You see, I’m not the only cultural heretic around . . .)

Powerful forces have a vested interest in our believing the myth (and it *is* a myth) that we are following no one at all. Many of the cultural liturgies that indoctrinate us daily—“Be true to yourself,” “You do you,” “Speak your truth”—can be traced back to sources with a nefarious agenda.⁵ If “they” (whether multinational corporations, politicians, anti-democratic government agents, marketing departments, influencers who just want more followers, etc., etc.) can make us believe that each person is a blank slate, just following the inner compass of our “authentic self” in an upward march to happiness, then they can keep us blind to all the ways we’ve been “discipled”—formed and manipulated—by *their* desires.

Any skilled con artist knows the key to deceiving your mark is to get them to believe your scheme was *their* idea. Translation: The key to getting people to follow you is to convince them they aren’t following anyone at all.

With the rise of social media empires and their spooky digital algorithms, these powerful forces now have direct access to our flows of consciousness every time we slide our thumbs across our phones. What we are led to believe are just ads, news links, retweets, and random digital flotsam are, in reality, mass behavior modification techniques intentionally designed to influence how we think, feel, believe, shop, vote, and live. To quote the tech philosopher Jaron Lanier, “What might once have been called advertising must now be understood as continuous behavior modification on a titanic scale.”⁶ The “world” (as it’s called in the New Testament) is *forming* us, constantly.

But what is it forming us *into*?

Because we are each becoming something. That's the crux of the human experience: the process of becoming a person. To be human is to change. To grow. To evolve. This is by God's design.

The question is not, Am I becoming a person?

It's, *Who* or *what* am I becoming?

If you plot the trajectory of your life over the next five decades and envision yourself at seventy, eighty, or a hundred, what kind of person do you see on the horizon? Does the projection in your mind fill you with hope? Or dread?

For those of us who desire to follow Jesus, here is the reality we must turn and face: If we're not being intentionally formed by Jesus himself, then it's highly likely we are being unintentionally formed by someone or something *else*.⁷

So, again, Who are you following?

The deeper question here is, In whom are you *trusting*? Who (or what) do you put your faith in to show you the way to the life you desire? It's my conviction that contrary to what we hear, living by faith isn't a Christian thing or even a religious thing; it's a *human* thing—we *all* live by faith.

The question isn't, Am I going to believe?

It's, *Who* or *what* am I going to believe *in*?

Meaning, Who or what am I going to *entrust* my life to? Do I really want to trust *myself*—or any other human, for that matter?

We creatures who seem to have gotten ourselves into the very mess we're trying to fix?

It's only human to be drawn to someone—a celebrity or guru or historical figure—and to desire to become like them. This is part of how God wired us to grow. We all have an ideal life we aspire to, and when we find a person or idea system that seems to embody what we want, we “follow” them, we put our trust in them. Or, in more Christian language, we “believe.”

Who do you believe in?⁸ Who is your luminary of choice, the person whose orbit you would give anything to spend a few days living in?

Put another way, Who is your rabbi?

I am one of many people who have found Jesus of Nazareth to be the most radiant light to ever grace the human scene. I'm an avid reader, and through the gift of literature, I have peered inside the minds of some of history's greatest thinkers. All of them have laudable traits (and some not so laudable ones too). But the longer I live and learn, the more I'm convinced that Jesus has no real competition, ancient or modern. In my estimation, no other thinker, philosopher, leader, philosophy, or ideology has the coherence, sophistication, and deep inner resonance of Jesus and his Way. Much less the staggering *beauty*.

In our secular age, the air we breathe is filled with skepticism, ennui, distrust of all authority, and the bending of truth to desire and feeling. Inside this cultural atmosphere, we are *all* doubting Thomas.

But even on the days when I struggle to believe that Jesus was who he claimed to be (spoiler: more than just a rabbi), I *want*

to believe. I *want* Jesus' vision of life in the kingdom of God to be true. I resonate at a soul level with the disciple Peter's conclusion:

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.⁹

I stand (or really, walk) with a vast multitude of others around the world and down through history who have come to believe: *There simply is no better way, truth, or life to be found than that of Jesus.*

Of the myriad of options, he's the one I choose to follow. I'm going to end up following someone, so I choose to follow Jesus.

The philosopher Dallas Willard used to say, "There is no problem in human life that apprenticeship to Jesus cannot solve." Following or, as I will describe it in the pages to come, *apprenticing* Jesus, is the solution to the problem of the so-called human condition. Name your malaise: political polarization, climate change, looming global war, the mental health epidemic, addiction, Christian nationalism, widespread hypocrisy among Christian leaders, our simple inability to be kind . . .

There is no problem in human life that apprenticeship to Jesus cannot solve.

You may have picked up this book because you're seriously considering becoming a follower of Jesus, but you want to know what it is you're saying yes to. That's wise; Jesus urged potential followers to "count the cost" before becoming his disciples.¹⁰

Or you may already be a Christian but find in your heart a growing desire to take your faith more seriously—to become an ap-

prentice of Jesus. To add a new level of intentionality to your spiritual formation. To live on purpose, not on accident.

Or you may be a longtime follower of Jesus but feel like you've hit a plateau. You're stuck, and you ache to get unstuck, to experience a deeper level of healing. To close the gap between your life and Jesus' "life that is truly life."¹¹ In other words, you want to become a saint.

Whoever you are and whatever prompted you to read this book, welcome. I'm so happy you've come along.

I am a follower of Jesus who has spent the better part of my adult life working out discipleship to Jesus in the post-Christian West. I have come to believe that there is a Way of life laid down by Jesus himself, and that if we give ourselves to it—and ultimately to *him*—it will lead to the life we *all* most truly crave.

This book is the culmination of decades of experience, trial and error, more failures than successes, and a lot of lessons learned in the school of hard knocks. But the pages to come are no tome; they are simply an exploration and explanation of what I believe to be three of the most important words ever spoken in the long annals of human history:

Come, follow me.¹²

Contrary to what many assume, Jesus did not invite people to convert to Christianity. He didn't even call people to become Christians (keep reading . . .); he invited people to apprentice under him into a whole new way of living. To be transformed.

My thesis is simple: Transformation *is* possible *if* we are willing to arrange our lives around the practices, rhythms, and truths

that Jesus himself did, which will open our lives to God's power to change. Said another way, we can be transformed *if* we are willing to apprentice ourselves to Jesus.

Then—and only then—can we become the people we ache to be and live the lives we were destined for.

That said, we hear the language of “following” Jesus all the time. But what exactly does it *mean*?

It means practicing the Way.

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.”⁹ 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 11–11:50A.M. “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-

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