

Living The Life Of A Disciple

by Todd Atkinson

This sermon delves into the distinction between being part of the crowd and becoming a disciple of Jesus, emphasizing the deeper commitment and intimacy that discipleship entails. It explores how the disciples were drawn to Jesus Himself, not just His miracles, and how they were willing to lay down their lives and follow Him closely. The message encourages listeners to move from being mere spectators to active participants in their faith, seeking a deeper relationship with Jesus and a life of discipleship.

Scripture: John 6:2, John 6:35, Matthew 16:24, Luke 9:23, Matthew 4:19, Luke 14:27, John 8:31, Matthew 28:19, Luke 14:33

Topics: "Discipleship", "Commitment to Christ"

Description

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Transcript

...to this wonderful passage of scripture this morning. Last week, Father Stephen preached a really wonderful message. Stirred me deeply.

He walked us through the Bible, and Ephesians in particular, and reminded us of Jesus' dream, His deep desire for a glorious church that is without spot or wrinkle, holy and without blemish in His sight. Years ago, it was those very words that gripped our hearts. I'll just wait for a second, that's a little loud, echoey.

Gripped our hearts, and they changed the way that we felt about church. They shifted something fundamental inside of us. We began to see church instead of just a place to attend, we saw it as something to build.

It wasn't just a place to consume, it was a place to commune, and to participate in, and to throw ourselves into. And so those words, we had them emblazoned everywhere, God's dream, a glorious church. And yet, having answered that question, it didn't mean that all our questions were answered.

We were still asking ourselves other really important questions like, what does it mean to be a glorious church? What does it look like to be a glorious church? In what ways would Jesus want His church to be

glorious? And so we went back to the Bible again, and we read through the life of Jesus with fresh eyes. It's a discipline that I brought into my Christian life. Sometimes I just have to go back in and I tell myself this, Todd, read it as though for the very first time.

Because we read scriptures, and we get accustomed to reading them in a certain way. We get accustomed to going there to look for a particular kind of thing. And sometimes we just have to go back and read it as though for the very first time, and to be struck again, to be moved.

Let it speak to us, not just read the scriptures selectively. And so we did just that. But we did have a goal, and our goal, simply put, was this.

To find those things that Jesus was most passionate about, and to make them our greatest passions. To identify those things that were His absolutely highest priority during His earthly ministry, and to make them our highest priority also. And we identified five things.

They came to be known as the five passions, and we have been pursuing them relentlessly ever since. Today we'll be looking at the second of those five passions, which could be called either a passion for teaching, or a passion for discipleship. They called Jesus rabbi, it meant teacher.

He taught, but those that even his teaching, those that were his best students, most accepting and receptive of his teaching, were called disciples. The passage that was read for us this morning, John chapter 6, begins with these words. We're going to have them put up on the screen.

After this, Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias, and a large crowd was following Him. Because they saw the signs that He was doing on the sick. Jesus went up to the mountain, and there He sat down with His disciples.

Have you noticed there are two distinct groups mentioned in this reading? There is the crowd, and there are the disciples. Both are mentioned throughout the gospel stories, and often side-by-side. Both of these groups were keenly interested in Jesus.

Both of them could be said in their own way to follow Jesus. Both were eyewitnesses of His mighty miracles. Both had the pleasure of hearing His wonderful teaching.

We could say that Jesus came for both of these groups equally. That Jesus loved both of these groups, the crowds and the disciples, and that He loved them equally. And that Jesus reached out to both of them, and that He reached out to them equally.

Which raises the question then, if these two groups of people had so much in common, then why are they two groups and not one? Why does the scripture differentiate between them? If they both follow Jesus, albeit in their own way, and Jesus loved them both equally, then in what ways are they genuinely different? What do those differences consist of? And so if we return again to our reading, it says a large crowd was following Jesus because they saw the signs that He was doing of the sick. Jesus went up to the mountain and there He sat with His disciples. Let's begin to spell out some of the differences.

The crowd were there for the signs. The crowd were attracted to the miracles of Jesus. But the disciples were attracted to the Jesus of the miracles.

The crowd were drawn to Jesus' provision. This is ultimately a story about the provision of bread. But the disciples were drawn to Jesus' person.

If you read further into the chapter, you'll see that the crowds wanted bread, but the disciples wanted something more. They wanted the bread of life. They realized that the bread was only a symbol.

It was called a sign. It was pointing beyond itself. But the crowd couldn't see that.

They just wanted more bread. It made life easier in the moment. But the disciples saw that the bread, as wonderful and kind as a gift it was, was simply a sign, an indicator, pointing to the one that was the bread of life, who if they would consume Him, eat Him, take Him into themselves, believe in Him, love Him, that He would satisfy them into the eternal life.

So you can see that the crowd is living for the moment, whereas the disciples were living for eternity. The crowd wanted something. The disciples wanted someone.

The crowds were driven by self-interest. What can we get out of this? The disciples were driven by self-denial. They loved Jesus so much that in meeting Him, they wanted to lay down their old lives and start a new life following Him.

The crowd were certainly not interested in laying anything down. The crowds wanted Jesus to do something for them. The disciples wanted Jesus to do something in them.

Transformative. The crowds were, you could say, takers. But the disciples were learners.

A disciple by definition is a learner, a disciplined learner, a dedicated learner, a devoted learner. Someone who has found a master to learn from, to pattern his or her life after, someone to follow, someone to listen to, someone whose teaching you can imbibe, whose way of life you can pattern. The crowds wanted to follow Jesus from a safe distance.

A disciple will never be happy with a safe distance. They want it up close and personal. Distance won't do.

How do you do a relationship from a safe distance? How do you do the things of God from a safe distance? The disciples needed more than that. The crowds were offended when Jesus did something that they didn't expect, something they didn't count on, something that they didn't see coming. You'll see it later in the chapter.

But interestingly, the disciples were curious when Jesus did something that they didn't expect. So long after the crowds threw up their hands in offense and walked off, the disciples would come to him in private and say, what do you mean by that? They're curious. They wouldn't leave.

They would draw all the closer. The crowds, verse 61 tells us, crumbled. The disciples worshipped.

The crowds are still very much in charge of their own lives. The disciples have relinquished self-rule. They're not a disciple if you're still in charge.

Gladly laid down self-rule. They are no longer on the throne of their own lives. They don't want to be.

They've tried it. They've been there. And they found that as they lay their own life down for Jesus, they have found it.

And that the crowd, as they try to preserve their life, it's like trying to squeeze sand in your hand. The more they try to preserve their own life, the more they find themselves losing it, bereft of real life. The more the disciples lay down their life, the more they found that their hearts were overflowing with life.

Jesus loved the crowd. He taught the crowd. He fed the crowd.

He healed the crowd. But be on no illusion, out from the crowd, he called people to become disciples, to step out of the crowd, to step away from the crowd, and to come closer. Do you know that all the kind of famous disciples, the twelve who came, the twelve apostles, you know that every one of them started as part of the crowd? If you were to undertake a kind of careful and chronological study of the gospel, you would see that they all started as part of the crowd.

They were fishermen, and news of this Jesus began to circulate. They began to hear him report to them. They began to hear him preach from a distance, from the kind of safety of their boat.

They were close enough to the shore to see, oh, there's that Jesus fellow. They didn't know that he was God, but that they knew that God was with him in a special way. They heard of his miracles.

They heard that his teaching was having a powerful impact. He was shaking the area, until one day Jesus came to them amongst this large crowd, and they heard these famous words directed at them. Come follow me.

Don't just be a member of the crowd, be a follower. Come follow me. And that was decision time for them.

At that point they knew that they were at a safe distance. They were intrigued. They're interested.

They're respectful. They know that God is up to something. God is in this man.

God is doing something. But now when that finger is pointed their direction, that hand, that invitation, come you, you guys, Peter, John, James, follow me. Be a follower, not just a member of the crowd.

Here's a disciple by definition. They couldn't say no. They had to.

They knew that that invitation may never come around again. No one had ever looked at them with that kind of value. No one ever spoke to them with that kind of word, because when he said come follow me, that presupposed he wanted them.

He valued them. He wanted them close and personal. They're fishermen.

Nobody ever looked twice in their direction, but for fish. But no one ever looked at them as men, as people. Let alone someone sent by God.

That means that God wanted them? And so the Bible tells us that they literally left out of their boat their livelihood, their profession, what they had known. They swam to shore to say yes to that call. I don't longer be just a crowd, but I want to be a disciple.

And they walked close to Jesus from that day on. You see, because the disciples get the good stuff. In about, how old was I? Maybe 21, I had the great joy of being a youth pastor in the United Kingdom, just on the border of England and Wales.

A little place called Oswestry. And the last week that I was there, I had a friend visit me from Canada. So I thought I'd take a week off, borrow a car, drive him a little bit around the UK.

And particularly, we were visiting places that were historically important to us. A lot of our great heroes of the faith had lived and ministered in those places. So that's the kind of trail we were doing.

And one of our destinations was Oxford University, a thousand-year-old university, because John Wesley, George Whitfield, other great heroes of the faith, they had studied there, or they had been teachers there. And so we arrived one night, I think it was about 6 p.m., starting to quiet down, and we just walked around that thousand-year-old university. And it was like stepping back in time.

And it was like coming into contact with my historical heroes. It was a surreal experience for me. And down some little back alley, little cobbled back alley, I whispered a prayer, if you could even call it a prayer, that I never thought God would listen to.

And if I was God, I certainly wouldn't have listened to it. This little prayer that says, Lord, I would really love to come study here, says the kid who barely made it through high school. Never thought anything of it.

I moved back to Canada shortly after that, was in what I call the year of prayer. And in that year of prayer, God spoke to me. In prayer, and I felt this is what he said, he said, I'm going to send you to walk in the footsteps of your heroes.

I'm sending you to Oxford University. And I didn't even make the connection. I totally forgot.

It took me years to remember that tiny little whispered prayer. I didn't even remember it. Why would God? So that began a process of learning, how do you get into Oxford University? Very different system than here, particularly if you're coming as a Canadian.

Particularly if you're coming with virtually no qualifications, and nothing but a word from the Lord. Particularly if you're coming without financial backing or scholarships. So I used to travel and visit there.

I was back living in Wales. I'd borrow a car. I'd drive down there.

I couldn't afford a hotel or a bed and breakfast. So I would sleep in my car, a borrowed car, which could be frightfully cold at night. But I would wake up, and they actually had some kind of public washrooms that were underground, under one of the main streets.

And I would go, and I would get cleaned up, and try to look smart, and then just say, Lord, I have no idea how to direct me. I'll go meet people. I will go ask questions.

But after I did this a number of times, I had this distinct sense that I felt like I'm on the outside looking in, because I see the students. And then there's me, trying to figure out how to become a student. And they would disappear into libraries, and there's a lot of beautiful kind of stone structures, and they'd disappear behind a wall, and I couldn't follow them in there.

There's a lock and key, or by this point, a code on the wall. And I remember thinking, the really good stuff is behind those walls. And so I'm like part of the crowd.

I'm a tourist, and it's a wonderful spot to go as a tourist. So the first couple of times you go, you're very struck by the aesthetics, and the history. But by the time I've been there five or six times, it feels like it's

not enough.

I don't want to be a member of the crowd anymore. I've seen all this. The aesthetics are beautiful, but they keep going behind closed doors, and I have the distinct sense that that's where the great stuff is.

And I can't get there. I want into the old libraries. I want into the places the crowds can't get to, that tourists can't go, they're forbidden to go.

And so after a lot of miracles and divine interventions, eventually I got a letter in the mail that says, Dear Mr. Atkinson, we are pleased to inform you. I've memorized it. I mean, it struck me so much, it's still in my head.

This is a lot of years ago. A lot of years ago. We are pleased to inform you, you have been accepted.

I still remember my first time going back to that university as a student, and not as a tourist, not as a crowd. What it felt like to be on the inside, and to have access to this great wealth of history and literature and all these wonderful places that I could go, that I couldn't go before. And I think that's what the original disciples felt like.

I can't just be a member of the crowd anymore. I can't just be a spectator. I can't just be a tourist.

I can't just watch him from a distance doing all the cool stuff. But staying in my boat, I need more than being a member of the crowd. I need to move closer.

And when he here says, come and follow me, that's their in, that's their letter. That's their letter of acceptance. They have it in their hand.

He invited me to be more than a crowd. And we have to hear him say those words to us daily. It's not just enough once in our Christian life to hear the words, come follow me, and we make a good decision, we embark on that journey.

It's something we have to hear every day, and respond to positively every day. Because being a disciple is where the good stuff happens. Further into this story, there's a great miracle where Jesus multiplies bread and fish.

The crowds witnessed this miracle, but do you know the disciples participated in it? They got to be part of it. It was as they took the bread around. Two people, the miracle happened in front of their very eyes.

Jesus ministered to the crowds, but he ministered with the disciples. There's a witness. Let's do this together.

And when the busy days like this were done, Jesus would often withdraw from the crowds, and he would just take his disciples alone. He preached to the crowds, but he prayed with his disciples. Heaven touched earth with his disciples.

He showed them how to access heaven with the disciples. He was generous to the crowds, but he was intimate with the disciples. He shared his sermons with the crowds, but he shared his secrets with his disciples.

I hope as I walk through those things that your hunger to be a modern day disciple of Jesus increases. If this is a decision you made at some previous time of your life, this is a really good day to make that decision again. To hear Jesus say to you, come follow me.

If you've never made that decision, you didn't even know that that invitation was even a possibility. You just thought, go to church, be part of the crowd. That's as close as I could ever get.

And so maybe today is something of a surprise for you. That Jesus wants something closer with you. And it's for you, not just for the guys up here.

Not just for the leaders, the musicians. It's for you. And if you're at a stage of your life where you're like, yeah, I'm a part of the crowd, I'm interested, I'm curious, but I need more.

Then the call to discipleship is that call to more. So I've seen people go from becoming a person of the crowd to becoming a disciple, but we've all been around long enough that we've also seen people go from disciples to be back to be members of the crowd. For a while, we take a step back.

We become less engaged. We're not sure we want to participate. Discipleship just sounds too rigorous and we kind of lose sight of the life and benefits, the closeness.

And so sometimes we were a disciple and we just take a step back into the crowd for a while. And if that's you today and you feel like, yeah, and it's not enough, that you remember other times of your life where there was just much more intimacy, much more closeness and a more joyous walk with Jesus, then today is a day to hear His voice calling you back and to step back into a life of active discipleship. What made these two groups different? He loved them both.

He preached to them both. Did miracles for them both. Healed them both.

One of these groups were just happy to receive. But it's the other responsiveness to Jesus Himself. I want Him.

I want to follow Him. I want to be close to Him. I want to become like Him.

That made all the difference. So why don't we just take our, bow our heads in a word of prayer. When Jesus said, come follow me, something happened on the inside of them.

I mean, something happened on the outside of them. But there was an internal response to that. But then we had an external response.

So as I preach through these words today, what's happening on the inside of you? You might be here today and say, nothing, that's the problem. I feel flat. That's the problem.

Then give Him your flatness. Even respond. I respond to you in my flatness.

I give you my flatness. I am not okay. And I give you my not okayness.

Because that's what a disciple does. It can be a little painful to think, to look inward. It can be a little painful to think, I'm not okay.

It can be kind of painful to think, I feel very flat and complacent. And we all have those times. And that's why even thinking about it can be a little difficult.

But my encouragement to you is don't check out. Because maybe that's why we feel flat and complacent. Is that some earlier time, some part of us checked out.

Some part of us threw up our hands. And so we don't. We say, Lord, I'm not checking out.

It's a little difficult and a bit painful to talk about how I'm doing on the inside. But you didn't ask the disciples to change themselves. You just asked them to come.

You didn't ask them to make themselves holy. To make themselves missional. You said, I will make you.

I will make you. Alive. I will make you.

Let those words resound in your heart. So they still came, knowing they couldn't even make themselves. Holy.

Alive. Vibrant. They just came.

And when they came to Jesus, He changed the landscape of their soul. The weather patterns over their inner life began to shift. Just as I am.

Without one plea. But that my Savior's blood was shed for me. O Lamb of God, I come.

Just sit in that. You who do truly and earnestly repent of your sins. Are reconciled and at peace with your neighbor.

And intend to lead the new life. The life of a disciple. Following the commandments of God.

And walking from henceforth in His holy ways. Draw near now with faith. And make your humble confession to Almighty God.

Let's take a moment for private confession. We don't just confess our sin. Confess your state.

Lord, here's how I'm doing on the inside. I bring you my confused self. My conflicted self.

My disconnected self. I have desires rising in me that I do not understand or even want. I bring myself to you.

I offer my very self to you as I am. Sometimes, for some of us we exercise a little bit of holy memory. Lord, in the days that I walked most closely with you, my heart was most happy and free.

The scriptures are true. The disciple's life is the life for me. Whatever disappointments may have happened that have derailed that, I offer them to you.

Whatever pain I have suffered, I offer it to you. Sorrow and loss. Just tell the Lord, I've never been the same since that loss.

And the Lord is coming right now in tenderness to people who suffered the loss of a loved one and it disoriented you. He's coming to you now with understanding and grace and tenderness. And for you others, it may have been the loss of a dream, of an opportunity that somehow caused us to just check out.

And now Jesus is beautifully willing you to check back in. Let us make our confession out loud together and with humble hearts. Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word,

and deed.

By what we have done and by what we have left undone, we have not loved you with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ.

Have mercy on us and forgive us that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways to the glory of your name. Amen. Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, who in his great mercy has promised forgiveness of sins to all those who sincerely repent and with true faith turn to him.

Have mercy upon you. Pardon and deliver you from all your sins. Confirm and strengthen you in all goodness and bring you to everlasting life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

If you will receive from Christ the full absolution of your sins that together we proclaim. Stand and sing with us. How great the chasm that lay between us How high the mountain I could not climb In desperation I turned to heaven And spoke your name into the night Then through the darkness Your loving kindness Tore through the shadows of my soul The work is finished The end is written Jesus Christ my living Lord Who could imagine So great a mercy What heart could battle Such boundless grace The God of ages Sent down from glory To wear my sin and bear my shame The cross has spoken I am forgiven The king of kings Calls me his own For savior I'm born again Jesus Christ my living Lord Hallelujah He's the one who set me free Hallelujah Death has lost its grip on me You have broken every chain There's salvation in your name Jesus Christ my living Lord He's the one who set me free There's salvation in your name Jesus Christ my living Lord He's the one who set me free Hallelujah Death has lost its grip on me You have broken every chain There's salvation in your name Jesus Christ my living Lord Throw yourself into him Take our focus off ourselves and put it onto Christ Give all of our devotion Affection and love It's a good opportunity to move from spectating To participating Especially some of us that have known lives of deep worship Now we're not sure what interrupted that But may there be a grace here today Grace from heaven That will help us to find our worshipful selves To find our deep heart Devotion The Holy Spirit unlike any other has this burning heart That he imparts to disciples Many of us know that experience where we couldn't help it Our hearts burned with love We didn't even have to work at it but we did have to say yes We would allow the spirit to rekindle or kindle for the first time A deep love for him The Holy Spirit amongst us today Be with us as the burning Desire of heaven May he kindle and rekindle our hearts Lead us again Jesus Hallelujah Praise the one who set me free Hallelujah Hallelujah You have broken every chain There's salvation in your name Jesus Christ my living hope Hallelujah Praise the one who set me free Hallelujah You have broken every chain There's salvation in your name The Lord be with you beloved Lift up your hearts Let us give thanks to the Lord our God Holy and gracious Father In your infinite love you made us for yourself And when we had sinned against you And become subject to evil and death You in your mercy sent your only son Into the world for our salvation By the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary He became flesh and dwelt among us In obedience to your will He stretched out his arms upon the cross And offered himself once for all That by his suffering and death we might be saved By his resurrection he broke the bonds of death Trampling hell and Satan under his feet As our great high priest he ascended to your right hand In glory that we might come with confidence Before the throne of grace On the night that he was betrayed Our Lord Jesus Christ took bread And when he had given thanks he broke it And he gave it to his disciples saying take eat This is my body broken for you Oh believe me our Lord understands brokenness Do this in remembrance Of me Likewise after supper Jesus took the cup and when he had Given thanks he gave it to them saying drink This all of you for this is my Blood of the new covenant which is shed for you and for Many for the forgiveness of sins what wonderful good News Do this Whenever you

drink this chalice Do this in remembrance We celebrate the memorial of our redemption Oh father in this sacrifice Of praise and thanksgiving And we offer you these gifts Sanctify Them by your word and Holy Spirit To be for your people The body And the blood of your Son Jesus Christ Sanctify Sanctify And be made one body with him So that he may dwell in us and we in him In the fullness of time put all things in subjection Under your Christ and bring us with all your saints Into the fullness of your heavenly kingdom where we shall see Our Lord face to face All this we ask through your son Jesus Christ by him and with him and in him In the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory Is yours almighty father now and forever Hallelujah Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed once For all upon the cross he said I Am the bread of life which if a man Or woman eats he shall never die But shall live

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