

FOLLOW. BECOME. LIVE. // Become Like Jesus

If we were to go into the average church on a Sunday morning, poll the room, and ask everyone gathered to define the term “Christian,” we would get hundreds of varying answers because the term Christian is not clearly defined in the Bible. In fact, the term Christian was first used as a derogatory term referencing those who followed Jesus, and the term only occurs **three times** in the Bible.

That’s why today, we find all kinds of different categories of Christians...

- Episcopalians,
- Anglicans
- Baptists,
- Methodists
- Lutherans
- Presbyterian,
- Church of Christ
- Calvinist/Arminian
- Pentecostal, Charismatic
- Cessationists
- Non-denominational

There are so many categories for “Christians” because the term “Christian” can mean just about anything we want it to because it’s not clearly defined.

But when Jesus referred to His followers, and when His followers referred to themselves, they were referred to, not as Christians but as...^{*Andy Stanley, Christian or Disciple?}

DISCIPLES

In original Greek, the word for Disciple is *Mathētēs* – it means to be a student, a learner, a pupil. To “apprentice” under someone is probably the closest thing today to what this actually looked like.

But to be an apprentice, a disciple, a follower of Jesus is to not just learn a skill or a trade but to learn an entirely new way of life. The word Christian shows up three times in Scripture. Disciple is mentioned 268 times in the New Testament. It’s narrowly defined; we have no room to redefine it to mean something different.

Jewish historians will tell you that in the first century Israel, it was every young man’s dream to follow a rabbi, to be a disciple... to be a learner, a pupil, a student, a follower of a rabbi.

They would memorize the entire Torah: (first five books of the bible) Genesis, Exodus,

Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

These men would memorize it by age 12! They would approach a rabbi and say, “*Can I follow you?*” The Rabbi would then ask a series of questions to test the aspiring young man, and depending on the answers he provided, the rabbi would then look at the young boy and say, “*Follow me.*” In other words, “*I believe you have what it takes to be one of my disciples.*”

From that moment on, everything the young man did, he did through the filter of what the rabbi would do. And so, a disciple is someone that wanted to become just like the one they were following. Which is why the decision to receive salvation, to surrender your heart and life to Jesus, to place Him on the throne of your life... that decision is not the finish line. It's the starting point. It's the beginning of a life-long journey of being made into the image of the One you follow—of becoming like Jesus.

Following Jesus is daily decision.
Becoming like Him is a lifelong process.

The natural questions that modern people have when talking about this are:

1. CAN I become like Jesus? Is it even possible? And if we can...
2. HOW DO I become like Jesus?

1. CAN I become like Jesus?

Maybe you hear this and think, *There's just no way. I can't become like Jesus! I'm human, He's God! I'm a created, finite, being. He is infinite and eternal, and He walks on water! And raises people from the dead! And casts demons into pigs, and He rose from the dead! He conquered death! I can't do that! I can't be like Jesus!*

That's fair. Just to clarify, the Bible doesn't say you can *BE* Jesus. The scripture tells us that's it's not just God's desire that we become like Jesus; it's God's WILL that we become like Him.

1 Thessalonians 4:3, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification...”

Luke 6:40, “Students are not above their teacher, but all who are fully trained will be like their teacher.”

Romans 8:29, “For God knew His people in advance, and He chose them to become like His Son...”

2 Corinthians 3:18, “...And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like Him as we are changed into His glorious image.”

God loves you as you are but not enough to leave you that way.

In 2022, the global self-improvement market was valued at \$38.3 billion, and in the next seven years, it's expected to grow to \$81.6 billion.

<https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2023/11/30/2788922/0/en/Latest-Global-Self-Improvement-Market-Size-Share-Worth-USD-81-6-Billion-by-2032-at-a-8-CAGR-Custom-Market-Insights-Analysis-Outlook-Leaders-Report-Trends-Forecast-Segmentation-Grow.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CAccording%20to%20the%20latest%20research,forecast%20period%202023%20to%202032.%E2%80%9D>

The research tells us that we want to change! We want to grow, and we don't know how. Do you ever think about the fact that if the self-help industry really worked, we wouldn't need it anymore? You'd read the book, watch the seminar, apply it and be done. But it doesn't work, and it doesn't last.

God's will is not that we just grow, but we grow into the image of His Son. All this begs the question, if it is not only possible but commanded that I become like Jesus, then...

2. HOW DO I become like Jesus?

Here's the roadmap Jesus gives us:

John 15:4, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me."

ABIDE: To remain, to dwell, to be interwoven; to stay connected.

Jesus uses an analogy that makes this so crystal clear. He says, *I am the vine. You are a branch. Can a branch produce fruit if it's not connected to the vine? No, it cannot. If a branch is disconnected from the vine but is trying really, really hard to produce fruit, will any fruit appear? No! Why not? Because it's not connected to the vine, the source that provides all the necessary nutrients it needs to be able to produce fruit.*"

Francis Chan uses a great analogy. He says, *"Have you ever seen a sheep frantically running around trying to figure out how it's going to produce wool? A sheep doesn't TRY to produce wool. The job of the sheep is to follow the shepherd. It eats and sleeps where the shepherd tells it, and over time the sheep naturally produces wool. It doesn't have to try. It just happens. Why? Because it's a sheep! That's what a sheep does."*

In the same way, a branch connected to the vine will produce fruit. It's not focused on producing fruit; its focus is on the vine. Abiding, remaining connected, drawing its life from the vine, and the fruit just happens! Jesus is telling us here that if we're not connected to Him, if we're not abiding in Him, it doesn't matter how much self-effort we put into it, how much stress and worry we carry into our day. If we're not interwoven with, interconnected to the vine, to Jesus, we won't produce an ounce lasting fruit.

John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

God's desire is that we wouldn't just grow a little bit. Jesus isn't settling for a little. He wants all of you! Why? Because He wants to grow you in every area of life. He wants you to bear MUCH fruit!

Now, we have to understand whenever the Bible talks about fruit, it's not talking about behavior. It's talking about our character. Becoming like Jesus and trying to behave like Jesus are worlds apart from one another. Anyone can temporarily change their behavior for a time. But behavior modification doesn't last.

If a marriage is on the rocks and the wife says, "I can't take this anymore. I'm leaving you unless you change!" What's the husband's motive for changing? Fear. If he does try to change one of two things will happen...

1. He'll change his behavior until he feels like things are okay and then he'll slip right back into the old behaviors that drove her to threaten to leave in the first place...
2. Or he'll keep trying really hard to behave differently while his character remains the same. And eventually, he'll become resentful about the fact that he's working so hard to be different when nothing has changed internally. He'll begin to resent his wife until he either begins lashing out or just goes back to his old ways.

Change from the outside/in doesn't last. It eventually falls apart unless our character is changed and made new. Unless our motivational wiring is reconfigured, the external behaviors that we try to implement will not last.

Have you ever met an uptight, stuffy, religious person? There is no humor, joy, or light-heartedness about them. Religious people get more angry, controlling, and bitter over time because they don't feel like **ALL their religious self-effort** is paying off the way they want it to. They follow God, not because they love God, but because they want God's stuff. They want the benefits without the relationship. God is simply a means to an end. That's not at all what Jesus invites us into.

Jesus doesn't say to work really hard, change your behavior, and then you'll get His blessings. The invitation of Christianity is to surrender everything about yourself to Jesus! Take your hands off of your life, to let go of control, and allow Him to call the shots. When you do this, Christ's Spirit takes up residence inside of you, connects you to Jesus, who is the TRUE VINE, and He will be the One that will change you and grow you. He will be the one to produce fruit in your life. The character is a by-product of being connected to Him.

In fact, we're told **what fruit** is produced in those who are drawing their life from the vine.

Galatians 5:22-23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control...”

Every single one of these is a reference to your character. It's not just about loving things. It's about if you're a loving person. It's not about acting kind, or good, or patient occasionally. It's about the pattern of our lives being one of faithfulness, goodness, gentleness, joy, kindness, peace, and patience.

The way you know you're really growing spiritually is when all of these traits begin to grow together. It's not a checklist. In a cluster of grapes, you don't have one grape that's ripe and the rest of the cluster is nonexistent. They grow gradually together over time. Give yourself grace. A cluster of grapes doesn't grow overnight, and neither does our character.

So, if that's the character that God grows in us, what's our part in that equation? How do we cooperate in the process of becoming like Jesus?

Over the last several years, we've spent significant time talking about the spiritual practices that we see in the life of Jesus. The Spiritual practices are not about earning something from God but about making ourselves available to God.

We've broken these practices down into four categories, and we refer to them often...

1. **Private Devotion** – Growing in intimacy with God.
2. **Biblical Community** – Growing in relationship with others as we follow Christ together.
3. **Missional Living** – Making a spiritual impact in our relationships and community.
4. **Kingdom Stewardship** – Faithfully investing what God has entrusted to us.

I want to cover two.

1. **Private Devotion**

Scripture - Listening to God's voice through reading His word.

Sabbath – Setting work aside and resting in God's goodness and provision over your life.

Fasting – Abstaining from physical needs and desires to grow in spiritual dependence.

Prayer – Conversing with God throughout each day.

Now, here's the mistake we make. Like New Years Resolutions, we go *“I'm going to read the Bible and pray for two hours every morning for the whole year,”* when we're not even reading for 10 minutes a day right now.

In order for a habit or spiritual practice to be improved it first has to be established. If you're not reading the WORD daily right now, start by getting into the word three to five

minutes in the morning each day. Wake up and journal three sentences of a prayer to God.

You can't go from zero to 100. If you want to get to 100, you have to start with zero to one. Establish the rhythm, the routine the practice, the habit, then improve on it. We overestimate what we can do in the short run and drastically underestimate what God can do with a faithful life.

2. **Biblical Community** – Growing in relationship with others as we follow Christ together.

Galatians 5:25-26, 6:2, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another...Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

Immediately after describing the character that God wants to grow in us, the Apostle Paul immediately talks about our need for relationship with one another.

In the digital age, we're connected with more people than ever before, but we're lonelier than we've ever been. Our connections are shallow and guarded, distant and cold, and many of us don't have a single genuine friendship. We need people in our lives that will not only bear our burdens, and people whose burdens we can bear, we need people who will laugh with us, let loose with us, and at the same time know us well enough to sharpen us and move us toward Christlike character.

Today, if you're isolated, lonely, and disconnected, begin to pray for God to bring you into biblical community, and we're here to help you do that as well. Because the world doesn't need surface level, lone-ranger, or casual consumer, country club Christians. What the world needs is people that are following Jesus, becoming like Jesus, and living out the ways of Jesus.

The only way to do that is by following Jesus together.

Two simple questions for us to reflect on today:

1. What's one habit I can establish or improve upon that will help me “abide in in the vine”?
2. What else do I sense God saying to me today? How will I obey Him?