

## What Does It Mean to Follow Jesus & Where Do I Start?

So you've decided to follow Jesus. Great. But what exactly does that mean? Well, it may be easiest to explain what it "doesn't mean" first.

Following Jesus doesn't mean that you have to follow a specific set of rituals or rules. Sure, there are rituals and rules that are part of following Jesus, but these aren't the *basis* of our following Jesus, rather they're a *result* of having a relationship.

You see, rules and rituals in and of themselves aren't really all that life-giving outside the context of a living relationship with God through Jesus. So many times we begin following Jesus by trying to "follow the rules" or "be a better person" first. Let's be honest, that doesn't work, does it?

Jesus said things like "my teachings and my way of life aren't burdensome" (Matthew 11:30). He said that children were welcome to come to him and, in fact, that we could only enter into the Kingdom he is bringing if we entered it like a child (Mark 10:15).

But what does it mean to follow Jesus? I'm glad you asked. Following Jesus can be summed up in one word: **RELATIONSHIP**. To be a follower of Jesus is to be someone who has an ongoing, dynamic, and life-giving relationship with Jesus. It is something that is cultivated and curated by the Holy Spirit.

The rules and rituals that we practice are *responses* to the love of God we've experienced in Jesus.

We worship *because* we are loved.

We serve, *because* we are loved.

We pray, *because* we are loved.

We invest *because* we are loved.

We study the Scriptures *because* we are loved.

We start this journey with relationship, and it is enlivened and sustained by the spiritual practices we observe.

But how does this relationship start? Well, honestly, it started before you were even born. The Scriptures state pretty clearly that even before we were born, God knew your name (Jeremiah 1:5). The truth is, God has been pursuing you before you even had a clue that there was a God.

The problem is that you and I are not as we should be. There's a defect in the human condition, something the Scriptures call sin. Sometimes it's called brokenness, shame, or dysfunction, and while it has many names, it functions pretty much the same way: it blinds us to our need for God. It often causes us to chase after our own interests instead of the interests of others. It materializes in our lives through things like greed, lust, ambition, ego, selfishness, materialism, and many other names.

Here's the great thing, though, all it takes to begin a relationship with Jesus is to turn around, and allow ourselves to be embraced by his love, confess our brokenness, and begin to see ourselves in the light of Jesus' love for us. To embrace what he has accomplished for us through his life, death, and resurrection.

Where we might see *failure*, Jesus sees a *fruitful future*.

Where we might see *brokenness*, Jesus sees *wholeness*.

Where we might see *hopelessness*, Jesus sees *hopefulness*.

And all this begins with a humble admission that we need the love and relationship Jesus offers because we've come to understand that the only way to be truly human – to be human in the way God has always desired us to be – is to be in relationship with God.

So what's next? I'm glad you asked. Since the beginning of the Christian movement, one of the central practices – something we in the church call "sacraments," which means simply "sacred moments" – of the Christian church is the practice of baptism.

Baptism symbolizes outwardly the change that God has begun in us inwardly. It signifies and demonstrates to the Christian community called the church, that you and I are serious about following Jesus.

In baptism, water is used in a symbolic way to represent the cleansing that has taken place on the inside of us as we have surrendered to the love of God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

After you've welcomed Jesus into your life and been baptized, you're officially part of the family of God; that's right I said "family." You have a network of sisters and brothers in this spiritual community called the church. We pray

together. Worship together. Do life together. Support one another. Encourage one another. Serve one another. Believe in one another. And, most importantly, love one another. It's in the church that we practice a vital faith together in community!

As we wrap this up, let me offer you some tools that you can use to grow and develop your own faith and relationship with Jesus.

Throughout the history of Christianity, followers of Jesus, people that the Scriptures call "disciples," have utilized several important resources to cultivate and curate an ongoing dynamic faith life. Here are several of the central ones just to name a few:

- Worship:** Joining together as the church to praise God and be encouraged, strengthened, and taught in the faith.
- Prayer:** Developing the practice of engaging in an ongoing conversation with God and learning to hear God's voice.
- Bible Study:** One of the primary ways we begin and continue to learn about God and what God is like is by studying what has been handed down to us in the Bible. To be sure, it can be an intimidating book, but there's no cause for alarm, studying the Bible is something we do not just individually, but also in community.
- Serving:** We grow the fastest and learn the most when we are actively putting to use what we're learning. Serving others, both inside and outside the church, provides ample opportunities for us to put into practice what we're learning.
- Generosity:** We've been given so much, by investing in what God is doing through the local church, we have the opportunity to use some of our gifts of time, talent, and our treasures, to invest in the difference that God is making in our community and the world through the church.
- Mission:** Mission is the way in which we as followers of Jesus express our "skin in the game" in our community. Over and over again, the Scriptures are clear that the people of God exist to become a blessing to the communities in which they reside. So, we work to make our nation and neighborhoods better places to live by engaging in activities that seek to make evident the Kingdom of God in the world.
- Witness:** By definition, a witness of someone who testifies to the truth of something. As we witness to truth of God's love in Jesus, we point out the ways in which God is already at work in the world and join God in God's mission.
- Faith Sharing:** Sharing our faith with others can be a scary proposition, but it doesn't have to be. Have you ever recommended a restaurant, a bottle of wine, a hair stylist, or a plumber? If you have, then you already know how to share your faith. I think you would agree that Jesus is infinitely more meaningful than most any of the things that we share on a daily basis, so what we share about Jesus begins not with what we know about the Bible, but what we've experienced in our own relationship with God. It's really that simple.

If you don't already have a faith home, I'd like to take an opportunity to invite you to consider Grace Church. We aren't a perfect church; I would argue that there's really no such thing. We're simply people who are trying to live the Kingdom of God in the way that Jesus taught in the Gospels and the way that the early church did in the New Testament of the Scriptures.

If you'd like to talk to someone about your decision, feel free to contact the church office at [office@baycitygracechurch.org](mailto:office@baycitygracechurch.org) or at (989) 684-1101 and set up an appointment to talk to either Pastor Eric or Pastor Jeff.

Once again, congratulations on what I believe is the most important decision you'll ever make!

Grace & Peace,



Pastor Eric