



The Practicing the Way Course

Teaching Notes

Session 01: Following Jesus

Intro:

- Who are you following?
- Everybody is following *somebody*.
- Or something.
- Put another way, everyone is a disciple.
- The question isn't, "Are you a disciple?"
- It's, "Who or what are you a disciple of?"
- Two thousand years ago, a Hebrew Rabbi by the name of Jesus, made this invitation:
 - "Come, and follow me."
- He invited anyone and everyone to become his disciples — or students in living.
- Over the last two thousand years, millions of people have said yes to Jesus' invitation.
- It's changed not only their lives, but the course of human history.
- And it can do the same for you ...

Set up:

- "Following Jesus"
- You likely recognize this language if you've spent any time in the church, but what exactly does *it mean*?
- Does it mean we believe in a set of ideas called "Christianity"?
- Or go to church on Sunday?
- Or try hard to be a good person?
- And this raises another question: How do we follow Jesus in the modern world?
- Where we're all so busy, in a hurry, and distracted by our devices?
- Where burnout is a rite of passage and anxiety is like an electric pulse in our bodies all day long?
- Living in cities that are noisy and full of people with totally different worldviews?
- What does it look like to "follow Jesus" today?

Primer disclaimer:

- This eight-session course is a primer on spiritual formation.
- The goal is to lay a foundation for you to begin a lifelong journey of apprenticeship to Jesus.
 - You may be here and you're a brand new Christian — just getting started on your spiritual journey.
 - Or you may be here and you've been a Christian for your entire life, but you're ready to take your discipleship more seriously ...
 - Or you may be a serious follower of Jesus, but you want to learn more about the *practices* of Jesus, or how to craft a Rule of Life.

Seam: *Wherever you come from, we're so happy you're here.*

Welcome:

- Hello everyone, I'm Yinka; I'm your host for this course alongside John Mark, and on behalf of all of us at Practicing the Way, *welcome*.
- We designed this course as an introduction to spiritual formation that will set you up for a *lifetime* of learning the practices and relational rhythms of the Way of Jesus.
- And it's designed to be done in community, with the people to your right and left.
- In each session, we'll learn about apprenticeship to Jesus.
- And then we'll send you away with spiritual exercises, to take what you learned and, in the words of Jesus, "put it into practice."
- Afterwards, we will invite you to *reflect* on your experience, and pay attention to what God is doing inside you, with prompt questions in your Companion Guide.
- Then we'll come back together and process it all in community, where you'll get the chance to share honestly about your spiritual journey.
- This cycle of *teaching, practice, reflection, and dialogue in community* is the pathway to transformation.

Seam: For Session One, let's explore together what it means to follow Jesus.

Set up:

- Let's circle back to the story of Jesus calling his first disciples ...
- The story is from Mark 1, and in it, Jesus is walking along the the Sea of Galilee, when he comes upon Simon and Andrew, two brothers running a fishing business off the beach.
- Jesus says to them, "Come, follow me," and then we read this:
 - "At once they left their nets and followed him." (Mark 1v18)
- If you've read this story before, it's easy to lose sight of just how bizarre it is.
- What would make Simon and Andrew drop *everything* ... I mean, literally walk out of their business ... with no advance planning ... all to follow a Rabbi with no income stream, no organization, no home
- Can you imagine? You're just sitting at the office or wherever you work; Jesus comes by and says "Come, follow me"; and you just walk out of your job right then and there?
- What would move Simon and Andrew to give up everything?

Seam: Let me offer you a little backstory ...

"What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?":

- In first century Israel, you would regularly see rabbis walking along the road, or teaching at your village synagogue.
 - The word rabbi means "master" or "teacher."
 - Rabbis were the revered teachers, not just of the Torah, (the Bible of their day), but of life with God.
 - Most of them were itinerant; they would travel from place to place, to teach ...
- And behind them would be a small group of students called *talmidim*.
 - The Hebrew word *talmid* literally means "learner"; but it can also be translated "student," or "follower."
 - The most common translation is "disciple."
 - But a growing number of scholars argue the best word we have in the English language to capture the full meaning of the Hebrew word *talmid* is *apprentice*.

- The philosophy of education in the ancient world was nothing like ours in the modern West, where you go to class, sit through a lecture, and take notes for a test.
- It wasn't *informational*; it was *formational*.
- The goal wasn't just to learn about *something*, but to become *someone*.
- And discipleship — or “apprenticeship”—was the pinnacle of the first century Jewish educational system.
- Jewish kids started school around five years old at the *Bet Sefer*, or “The House of the Book,” which was the equivalent of elementary school.
- The primary textbook was the Bible, but it was an oral culture, and by the age of 12 or 13, most students would have memorized the *entire* Torah — the first five books of the Bible.
- At that point, the vast majority of students went home, to apprentice in the family business or work the family farm.
- But the best of the *best* would go on to a second level of education, called *Bet Midrash*, or “The House of Learning,” where they would continue their studies.
- It was built off the side of the synagogue and run by a full time scribe or teacher.
- By the age of 17 they would have memorized *the entire Old Testament*.
- At this point, the vast majority were done.
- But the best of the best of the *best* would go on to apprentice under a rabbi.
- Let's say you were one of the lucky few who became an apprentice to a rabbi: from that point on, your *entire* life was organized around three driving goals:

1. First: **To be with your rabbi**

- You would leave your family and your village and follow your Rabbi 24/7.
- Apprenticeship was deeply relational; you walk behind your rabbi on the road, eat every meal with them, keep Sabbath together — be *with* them all day long.

2. Secondly: **To become like your rabbi**

- The heart and soul of apprenticeship was to be with your rabbi *for the purpose of becoming like your rabbi*.
- You would imitate their whole life — copy their mannerisms, adopt their figures of speech;

You wanted to *be* like them.

3. Finally: **To do as your rabbi did**

- The goal of apprenticeship to a rabbi was to one day become a rabbi yourself!
- And if you made it through the long process of apprenticeship, then, when your rabbi felt you were ready, he would turn to you and say something like, “Okay, I think you’re ready: Go, and make disciples.”

Seam: This was what it meant to be a disciple. And, this is *still* what it means to be a disciple.

Apprentice to Jesus:

- If you flip the Jewish model of apprenticeship around, from the first century to the twenty-first, a clear picture of apprenticeship to Jesus comes into focus.
- To “follow” Jesus is to organize your life around the three driving goals of an apprentice ...
 1. To be with Jesus
 2. To become like Jesus
 3. And to do as he did
- A short word on each.
- First ...

1. **To be with Jesus**

- Jesus himself called his disciples to “be with him.” (Mark 3v14)
- This is the first goal of an apprentice of Jesus; to spend every possible moment in awareness of and connection to him ...
- ... in what the Dutch monk Thomas a Kempis called “a familiar friendship with Jesus.”¹
- Jesus himself said to his apprentices, “I have called you friends.” (John 15v15)
- And through friendship with Jesus, we enter into the inner life of God himself — the trinitarian community of love; through Jesus, we are enveloped in the love and joy and peace that is flowing between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And we live in connection to this love all day long ...

- Jesus called this “abiding.”
- The French contemplative Madame Guyon called it “continuous inner abiding.”
- The pastor A.W. Tozer called it “constant, conscious communion.”²
- But one of my favorites is from Brother Lawrence, who called it “the practice of the presence of God.”³
- We *can* live this way — in *connection* to Jesus.
- But — it takes *practice*, in turning our mind and heart to God, all through the day.
- Dallas Willard, a teacher of spiritual formation, said this:
 - “The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our minds ... This is *the* fundamental secret of caring for our souls. Our part in this practicing the presence of God is to direct and redirect our minds constantly to Him. In the early time of our ‘practicing’ we may well be challenged by our burdensome habits of dwelling on things less than God. But these are habits — not the law of gravity — and can be broken. A new, grace-filled habit will replace the former ones as we take intentional steps toward keeping God before us. Soon our minds will return to God as the needle of a compass constantly returns to the north. If God is the great longing of our souls, He will become the pole star of our inward beings.”⁴
- So the first goal of an apprentice: to be with Jesus.
- Our next goal is ...

2. To become like Jesus

- This is the bleeding heart of an apprentice — to be transformed from the inside out to think like Jesus, feel like Jesus, talk like Jesus, live and love like Jesus.
- 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.” (Luke 6v40, paraphrase)
- Notice his language — “everyone who is *fully* trained.”
- This is a process; none of us become like Jesus in a flash from heaven, but through a long process of *training* and apprenticeship to him.
- The word we use for this process is “spiritual formation,” which is the process by which our “spirit” (or our inner woman or man) is *formed* to be like Jesus himself.
- Imagine what Jesus would look like expressed through your personality, gender, ethnicity,

stage of life, culture ...

- Imagine if you were to become more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, and kind ... if you were to become like Jesus?
- This is the second driving goal of an apprentice of Jesus.
- Finally, it's ...

3. To do as he did

- Remember Jesus' invitation: "Come, follow me ... and I will send you out to fish for people." (Matthew 4v19)
- In English this sounds like a cheesy pun; it's not. "Fishers of people" was a first century idiom for a great rabbi, because the most brilliant rabbis had the ability to *capture* your mind and heart with their teaching.
- Jesus is saying, "Come follow me, and I'll train you to do what *I* do."
- Think about it: if you're an apprentice to a plumber, then at the end of your apprenticeship program, your goal isn't just to know all *about* plumbing, it's to be able to plumb a house!
- In the same way, the goal of an apprentice of Jesus isn't just to know all *about* Jesus, but to be able to do the kinds of things he did — to join Jesus in his work of preaching, teaching, serving, healing, prophesying, and deliverance ...
- This may sound impossible to you, but as you are with Jesus, and become like him, you will naturally find yourself saying and doing the kinds of things he said and did.
- Be with Jesus.
- Become like Jesus.
- Do as he did.

Seam: This is what we mean by "practicing the Way of Jesus."

Practicing the Way

- The first followers of Jesus called themselves "The Way" or "Followers of the Way."
- The Way of Jesus ...
- Is not just a set of beliefs — a theology or philosophy of life.

- And it's not just a moral system — a list of do's and don'ts.
- It *is* that, but it's more.
- It's a way of life. Based on that of Jesus himself.

Seam: To apprentice under Jesus is to practice his Way, and over a lifelong spiritual journey, to be formed into a person who is like Jesus.

Set up for group conversation:

- That was a beautiful story.
- But we all have our own story.
- So let's take a few minutes to debrief this in community.
- Circle up with 3 to 5 people, and talk through the following questions:
 1. What are you hoping Jesus will do in you through this course?
 2. As you look back on your life, who or what has had the greatest impact on your spiritual journey thus far?
 - (This could be a parent or family member; a childhood experience; an opportunity, or a great loss ... What is it for you?)
 3. What do you think is the driving aim of your life? Your top goals and priorities?
 - (Please don't feel pressure to pretend or give the "right" answer.
 - We want this to become a place where we share who we actually are without fear.)
- Finally,
 4. How can we as a community pray for you over the next seven weeks?
- Take 15 minutes to talk and pray ... and then we'll return with our practice for week one ...

Set up:

- As we said, each week, we'll offer you practices or spiritual exercises to turn the idea of following Jesus into a *reality* in your daily life.

- Because *information* alone is not enough for *transformation*.
 - To be transformed, we have to get the teachings of Jesus into the muscle memory of our bodies ...
 - A few things you should know before we turn to this week's practice:
1. First, alongside this course, we are reading the book *Practicing the Way* by John Mark.
 - This week we're reading Part 1.
 2. Secondly, go ahead and pull out your Companion Guide for the course.
 - In it are weekly exercises, questions for reflection, short readings, and more.
 - If you don't have a copy yet, it's available through the Practicing the Way site as a free digital download or in a print-on-demand version, but we *recommend* you order the hard copy to stay away from your phone during prayer.
 - Finally, to begin the course, we invite you to take the Spiritual Health Reflection.
 - This is a self-assessment we developed for you to plot yourself on your spiritual journey.
 - Once you have a baseline, you can return and retake the assessment in the future in order to better name Jesus' invitations to you along the way.
 - To access the Spiritual Health Reflection, just follow the link in your Guide or visit practicingtheway.org.
 3. Finally, in each session, Ken Shigematsu, who is a pastor and writer on the spiritual life, will direct us into our practice for the coming week.

Tutorial:

Week 1: Daily Prayer Rhythm

- Thank you for joining us. It's such a gift to connect with you in this way.
- The best way to "be with Jesus" is to develop a *daily prayer rhythm* ...
- You may already have a daily prayer rhythm, or you may not, but whatever your approach, you will see in our guide that our exercise for week one is to develop a daily time and place to connect with God in solitude and silence.

- This exercise can be done in a few minutes, or you can take up to an hour. The key is to start where you are, not where you feel you should be. If two or three minutes is all you have, start *there*, and then take the next step.
- I like to get up early and go for a walk with our golden retriever and then sit in a quiet spot in our house.
- Your morning with Jesus might begin with making a cup of tea or coffee.
- Or you might sit cross-legged on the floor, breathing slowly, in and out, through your nose.
- You might begin by praying a psalm, such as the 23rd Psalm, or reading another Scripture.
- Here are a few suggestions as you develop your practice of prayer:

1. First, find a quiet *place* that is distraction free.

- This could be a corner in your home or a nearby park.
- Find somewhere where you can focus and be at peace.

2. Second, identify a quiet *time*.

- For many people, the first thing upon waking is the best possible time to pray. But for you, it may be before bed, or while your baby is napping mid-morning, or on a lunch break.
- One helpful guideline is to *give God your best time of the day* — and then let the rest of your hours flow out of this time with God.

3. Third, come to quiet.

- If at all possible (unless you're using an app like Pray As You Go or Lectio 365 to guide your prayer time), put your phone away in another room.
- Start with a few deep breaths in and out of your nose. Give your mind and body time and space to calm down. This may take a few minutes. Remember, you're not in a hurry.

4. Fourth, open your heart to God in prayer.

- Though this may feel unfamiliar, and you might not know where to begin, you don't have to start from scratch.
- For thousands of years, followers of Jesus have used the psalms, a collection of poetic prayers found in the middle of the Bible, as a guide for daily prayer. The psalms were designed to be actively *prayed* or *recited*, not just read. When we're

struggling to pray, the psalms give us structure to pray and words to express our deepest emotions.

- You might start with Psalm 1. You could read a short psalm or portion of a longer psalm each day until you finish the entire book.
- As I said, this exercise can be done in five minutes, or it can easily take up to an hour ... Whatever it looks like, the goal this week is to set aside time daily to be with Jesus.
- The spiritual journey will involve our entire lifetime as we deepen and are transformed by our friendship with Jesus.
- God bless you as you experience God's presence in silence and solitude.

Session Summary:

- Let's review what we've covered in Session One.
 - Following Jesus is based on the first century practice of rabbis and apprentices.
 - For us today, to follow Jesus means to apprentice under him.
 - To apprentice under Jesus is to organize your life around three driving goals:
 1. To be with Jesus
 2. To become like Jesus and
 3. To do as he did
 - Apprenticing under Jesus means practicing a way of life.
 - And one of the best ways to begin is through a daily prayer rhythm, where you create a time and place for solitude, silence, and prayer.

Outro:

- Jesus did not invite anyone to convert to a new religion called "Christianity," he invited them to apprentice under him what he called "the kingdom of God."
- Simon and Andrew left everything to say yes to this invitation.
- But there are other stories in the Gospels of people saying *no* to the same incredible invitation.
- In America, for all the talk about how the West is post-Christian, 63% of people still self-identify as "Christians."

- But a number of independent surveys put the number of people who are actually *following* Jesus at around 4%.
- Many people who identify as “Christians” are not yet *disciples* of Jesus.
- Dallas Willard once said this:
 - “The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heart-breaking needs, is whether those who ... are identified as “Christians” will become disciples — students, apprentices, practitioners — of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence.”⁵
- What about you?
- Are you ready to follow Jesus?
- To become his apprentice?
- To be with him and become like him and do as he did?
- Do you ache for life with God? To be formed into a person who is pervaded by the love and joy and peace of God?
- The good news, or the *gospel* of the kingdom is this: God has come to you and me in Jesus, and made a way for us to apprentice under him into what one early apprentice called “the life that is truly life.” (1 Timothy 6v19)
 - In Jesus, God has taken on our death, to give us his life.
 - He’s taken on our brokenness so that we can take on his healing.
 - He’s entered our mortality, so we can step into his immortality.
- All we have to do is say yes to Jesus’ invitation to become his disciple.
- And Jesus said, “*Whoever* wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16v24)
- Whoever! Meaning, you don’t have to be the best of the best of *the best* to become an apprentice of Jesus ...
- You can be a mess or deeply wounded or stuck in an cycle of addiction or still full of doubt and not even sure what you believe yet.
- In other words, you can be human.
- *All* of us are invited to apprentice under Jesus ...

Notes

1. *The Imitation of Christ* (1427)
2. *Faith Beyond Reason* (1989)
3. *The Practice of the Presence of God* (1800s)
4. *The Great Omission* (2006)
5. *The Great Omission* (2006)