

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your
souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

—MATTHEW 11:28–30

CHAPTER I

Live as Jesus Lived

In 1989, I had one of those moments with God that turned my life inside out and upside down. I was attending a church conference in Mission Viejo, California, and I witnessed the ministry of a young man named Rick Warren who was in the process of breaking the missional code in his community. It didn't take long to realize that God had special plans for this pastor. There God spoke very loudly and clearly into my life; all I knew was that I wanted my life to count.

I went home and for the first time wrote out a life mission statement: “My mission is to discover true freedom in Christ and to help as many people as possible do likewise.” Since that time, I have been on a journey to discover what it really means to live like Jesus. At that time, I was in bondage, wrestling with strong emotions from earlier times in my life and coping with serious religious baggage. As a pastor, I lived under the pressure of meeting the expectations of the people I led, the pastors I knew, and the denomination I was connected with. You know that pressure as well. I didn't know the yoke that Jesus described as “easy.” My yoke was heavy and hard.

Since 1989, this journey has taken me to places I never envisioned going. First and foremost, it has taken me closer to finding the true freedom in Christ that I longed for. I feel what Paul must

have felt when he wrote the words, “I’m not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don’t get me wrong: by no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I’m off and running, and I’m not turning back” (Phil. 3:12–14 MSG).

I’ve learned that there is more to being a follower of Jesus than culture and behavior. It is easy to describe our relationship with God based on the works we do and the actions we take. It is even easy to assume that we are good Christians as long as we are involved in a local church, attend worship, engage in Bible studies and prayer services, tithe, and serve on a volunteer committee or two. If you are really honest, you know people who do all of the right things but at the same time are some of the meanest people in the world. They lack fruit. Nothing about their life and character has anything to do with Christ.

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? I love the way Jesus Himself answered this question: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28–30). Talk about freedom! This verse is liberating! In Jesus’s time, the “yoke” was a certain teaching, what a teacher taught his disciples. The Pharisees had a teaching, but it was difficult to follow and was accompanied by a heavy burden. It was controlling and impossible to live under. On the other hand, Jesus had a different yoke, a different teaching. It was easy and liberating because it was focused on who He was rather than on who the follower was trying to be. And for even more good news, this way that Jesus offered was a radical way of life He invites us all into.

To Know Him

The Gospel of John ends, “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (21:25). It is impossible to speak in detail about how to live as Jesus lived, but you can be certain that in order to follow Him, you have to know Him. And I mean really, really know Him well. Jesus spent nearly three years in intimate relationships with His disciples. They heard His call and they followed Him. They lived life together. They ate together, fought together, debated together, and experienced both hardship and joy together. They went everywhere together. They knew what He cared about, how He would handle different situations, and what was important to Him. They knew how He loved the Father and loved His neighbor as Himself. They knew that His life was marked by sacrifice and purpose. They understood that He was on a mission and that people mattered to Him. The disciples knew His ways intimately.

How do you boil down all of His teachings into one simple truth that serves as a rock-hard foundation for living as He lived? Perhaps the best description is found in Philippians 2:5–8: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross.”

If you pay attention to these verses, they give important insight into the life Jesus called His followers to live. Paul answered the question, “What does it mean to live as Jesus lived?” Notice what was happening here. No one took Jesus’s life; He laid it down voluntarily. Did you notice the progression of events? Jesus has existed for

eternity in heaven with God the Father, His equal. He chose to be born on earth in order to become a servant and to sacrifice Himself for the redemption of all mankind. Each step along the way took Him deeper into a sort of downward mobility that seems foreign to our way of life today. While we are constantly looking for how we can move up, get ahead, and break out in front of the pack, Jesus continued to surrender more and more of Himself until, ultimately, He gave up His own life.

Jesus was not the only one who understood this. Perhaps you remember John the Baptist, a relative of Jesus and known as the forerunner of Christ. Great crowds of people followed John the Baptist, and many of them even mistook him for the Messiah. Once Jesus appeared on earth, many of those who had followed John began to follow Jesus. We are told that many who formerly followed John came to Jesus to be baptized, and this raised concerns with John's disciples. When they approached John about this, he replied by saying, "He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30 KJV).

Downward Mobility

To me, that verse explains exactly what it means to live as Jesus lived. We are to decrease to ourselves on a daily basis in order that Jesus might increase in our lives. More of Jesus, less of me! We lose our lives in order to find His way.

My good friends Larry and Susan understand this better than almost anyone I know. I had the honor of working with Larry in the late 1990s after Larry left his dream church and his season tickets to the Tennessee Volunteers (which I understand is equivalent to giving away your birthright if you are from Tennessee) to join our organization. He felt called to something bigger that required him to become smaller. It was a very difficult move that required a significant amount of self-sacrifice. Not long after Larry arrived in our

organization, it became apparent that this act of sacrifice was only the beginning of his intentional downward mobility. Over the next few years, I watched God work in Larry's life as he chose to live in an apartment instead of buying a large brick house in the suburbs. He made radical adjustments to his lifestyle simply because he sensed a need to be prepared for whatever God wanted to do in his life.

It wasn't long until Larry and Susan felt confirmed that their calling was to leave everything familiar and move to a new country to plant churches. During this transition their intentional downward mobility became even more obvious. Over the next few months, I watched Larry and Susan sell nearly everything they owned: two cars, their furniture, their home, and almost everything inside it. Before they left on this new journey, Larry could literally fit everything he owned into one crate. Even their kids had reduced all of their possessions down to a box each.

On the last day Larry was in our office, he called our team into his office where only a few treasured possessions remained. He distributed these possessions among each and every member of our team. He gave one person a picture of the University of Tennessee Volunteers National Championship football team that hung on his office wall. He gave me a signed print of Lost Mountain, Georgia, the place where our lives first became intertwined and where Larry planted his first church. He gave away pictures of his kids to a couple of ladies in exchange for their commitment to pray for them. When everything was gone, we all joined hands, prayed, cried, and said our good-byes. Now it was official: Larry had nothing material left and was off on a bold new adventure to follow the call of Jesus.

We live as Jesus lived when we begin to experience this intentional downward mobility, making ourselves nothing, as Paul said. When this happens, we discover full access to His kingdom, and as we enter His kingdom, we come to experience a whole new way of life. Lately I've found a number of people who have a lot in

common with Larry and Susan. Not too long ago, I talked with a good friend who told me he had reached all of his professional goals as well as his goals for providing for his family. He has a wonderful wife and children, a nice home, a substantial income, and many wonderful relationships. He is truly living the American dream. Yet at the same time, he is living in tension with what has come to be really important to him. He feels called to follow Jesus in a radical way and to live as Jesus lived. It occurred to me as we spoke that my friend would spend the rest of his life working out this whole idea of being downwardly mobile. Sure, he has reached his goals, but often, reaching his goals has come with a great price. He realized that what he thought he wanted, by the time he attained it, wasn't actually what he needed.

Now, I am watching him go through a process similar to Larry and Susan's experience. I see him consistently and intentionally decreasing his hold on this life in order that Jesus might increase in his life. I am thankful that these types of journeys have become familiar to me, and it brings me immeasurable joy to see them played out among people I care about. I can only imagine the joy it brings our God! It is the journey that must become familiar to all of us if we are to follow Jesus in an authentic way. It is a journey for which we must be ready to reexamine everything we think we know.

Inside Out, Not Outside In

It is easy to look at the things we own or have achieved and assume that these things are the measure of a good life. We sometimes believe that the more we achieve or accomplish, the closer we come to arriving at a certain status in life and the more peace, meaning, and acceptance we will experience. We often assume that these things are associated with the life Jesus wants for us, only to discover they are, in fact, temporary. Be encouraged—it's not a new struggle. The religious scholars and teachers of Jesus's time felt this

as well. We buy into the idea that if we can master a moral code, Jesus will commend us for having lived a good life. This is a fallacy, and it is dangerous to believe. Jesus called the most morally correct people of his day hypocrites, blind guides, snakes, a brood of vipers, and whitewashed tombs (see Matt. 23:1–39). Ouch!

On another occasion when questioned by the Pharisees, He told them, “The kingdom of God does not come visibly, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). These words were indeed counter-cultural to the religious world of His day, and they still are today. As we live as Jesus lived, we may find the most turbulent times on the outside, but deep within ourselves we discover both the purpose and the peace of God. We learn that life isn’t about us, and therefore we begin to view our lives with a different perspective.

Upside Down, Not Right Side Up

I often wonder, *If Jesus were on the earth today, would I recognize Him?* I walk down the aisles of the stores where I shop, and I’m afraid that if Jesus looked like many of the people I see there, I probably would not have a lot to do with Him. Isn’t it amazing that we sometimes put Jesus into our own neat little boxes, assuming that He would act, speak, look, and think as we do? Instead of adjusting our lives to emulate His, we create a Jesus that accommodates our own choices and lifestyles. We will do nearly anything to justify our choices and our way of life.

We sometimes think it’s interesting how radical Jesus’s message was in His day, but if we examine ourselves, I think we’ll find that it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense today either. Read the passage of Scripture we refer to as the Beatitudes in Matthew 5. Jesus called them “blessed” who were poor in spirit, who mourned, or were meek or persecuted. You won’t find this ideology in a lot of leadership or self-help books. Jesus taught that the greatest among us

would be the least, and the last would ultimately be first. He raised up the humble. He sat a child in His lap as an example of greatness. At times He completely ignored the religious leaders of His day, and at other times He took them to task with a vengeance. He led from the back and served from the front. He modeled in every way that to really experience life, we have to give it away to others.

Great Big, Not Itty-Bitty

Frankly, we often live our lives as if we were at the center of all things, but our world becomes itty-bitty when it becomes all about us. What we learn by living like Jesus is that He considered others at the center of the world, and He knew how big the world truly was. He held what was huge in His very hands, and at the same time was in intimate contact with every little detail.

Nothing went unnoticed to Jesus. He felt the woman with the hemorrhage as she brushed by Him in a massive rush of people, and He also saw the crowds who came to hear Him teach and was moved with compassion because He knew they were like sheep with no shepherd. At one time He fed the five thousand and another time had a touching supper with the Twelve. He called His disciples to come follow Him one by one and at the same time held the world in His hand. He died on the cross for the sins of all people for all time, but while dying, He had an evocative conversation with a thief crucified beside Him.

Jesus came demonstrating that it is in no way all about us. This is not our little world, but rather we are citizens of His kingdom; and His kingdom is like a mustard seed that grows to the most magnificent proportion.

In John 3:16 we read that God so loved the world that He gave us His Son. Yes, it's true He loves me, but I am not the main attraction. He loves the whole world. He loves street gangs. He loves strippers. He loves AIDS victims in Zambia. He is really concerned about the

genocide in the Sudan. He pays attention to every conflict and every battle. His heart breaks for the injustices we fail to see. Yet, in far too rare moments, He peels back the veneer of my self-centeredness and allows me to feel His compassion for the world. He did it recently when I placed a pair of shoes on the hard, calloused feet of a ten-year-old in Jamaica. I think it was a first for both of us.

God cares about the hungry, the oppressed, the misdirected, and the disconnected. He cares about His world: world hunger, world AIDS, and world peace. He cares about you and me and even our pettiest of concerns. He invites us to His dream of peace on earth and goodwill toward all men. He invites us to join Him in His prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is done in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). To live as Jesus lived is to pray as Jesus prayed. Let Your kingdom come on earth in my life, in my environment, in my experience, and in my purpose as it is in heaven.

Simple, Not Complex

Even with the chaos of the world around us, it is still amazing to me that our lives can become so complicated. I think of my parents’ home, where they have four storage buildings filled with the things they have accumulated over the years. I was picking through them recently, looking for a few usable pieces of furniture for my daughter. I left that day promising them that I would return to take time to go through their stuff, thinking to myself that much of it should be hauled off to the garbage dump. It occurred to me that this is a good picture of how we accumulate so much stuff we don’t need and hang on to for years. Before we know it, our lives are filled with trash because we’re too afraid to throw it away, too afraid of what might happen if it weren’t around when we needed it.

I think the same is true for our relationship with Jesus. We begin this journey of following Jesus with simple, childlike faith. We are a lot like the blind man—all we know is that once we were

blind, but now we see. Coming to know Jesus and following Him are pure joy because we are focused solely on this loving relationship with our Savior.

Yet over time we begin to “supplement” that relationship with other things—things that really don’t have anything to do with Jesus, things we think we need because, on some level, we’re afraid that a time will come when Jesus won’t be enough and we’ll need those other things to support us. What was once simple becomes inordinately complex. But Jesus calls us to return to Him in simplicity, abandon our excess, and come to Him again as a child.

The Jesus Way

Yet we must be careful that when we talk of simplicity, it is not merely for the sake of simplicity. It is simplicity for the sole purpose of rediscovering the Jesus way of life. It is saying no to religion in order to say yes to Jesus. Where do we begin this journey of living as Jesus lived? In the early days of my encounters with Jesus, I had a Bible with all the words of Jesus written in red. I loved this Bible. I remember, as a thirteen-year-old, discovering Jesus through that Bible for the first time. I would read the red with a hunger for understanding. I was in love with Jesus, and somehow I knew intuitively that the key to my relationship with Him was in reading His words. I fell in love with the Jesus of the Bible and wanted to know and emulate everything about Him.

Living as Jesus lived is about coming to know Jesus personally through experience. It’s about coming to know Him through the lenses of the gospel and the presence of His very Spirit; it’s about a journey of friendship. It’s about living life to the maximum by living minimally. It’s about giving up to ultimately go up. It’s about laying down in order to be lifted up. It’s about becoming last only to find yourself first. It’s about decreasing in order to see Him increase. Living as Jesus lived is a new way of life that requires rethinking

all our assumptions, opinions, expectations, and experiences about the kingdom. Jesus descended in order to ultimately ascend, and so must we.

Something to Think About

1. What religious baggage needs to be eliminated from your life?
2. If living as Jesus lived involves intentional downward mobility, what does this look like in your life?
3. What does it mean for you to live as Jesus lived?