

What Does Jesus Say About Following Him? Part 2

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Hello Everyone, I'm David Emmert and I'd like to welcome you to a special studio edition of our sermon series entitled Inspired. We're spending several weeks looking at the teaching of Jesus — what he said about himself, what he said about us and what it means to follow him.

Last week we began our look at what Jesus says it means to follow Him. We said that our tier 1 responsibility was to love God. We're to take up our cross daily and follow Christ. Taking up our cross is all about dying to ourselves and allowing Jesus live in us. That's the personal cost of being a Christ follower.

Today we're going to talk about what it means to other people when we follow Christ. We don't live for Christ in isolation. It should always influence those around us. So how do we imitate Christ and pour ourselves out for others? What does that look like?

A critical piece of that is to be a part of a compassionate church, the body of Christ. It is our living laboratory where we learn how to be a Christ Follower.

Let's pray and get started! PRAY

Over the years, I've received LOTS of invitations to attend my high school class reunions. There was one at 10 years, 20 years, 30 years — you get the idea! I don't need to keep going OK! The point is, I've had a lot of opportunities to go to a high school reunion, but I've never been to one. It's not that I don't like the people who were in my class. Lots of them were great. They've gone on to really succeed and live productive lives.

I don't go to my class reunions because high school wasn't a very good season of my life. It was nobody's fault in particular. It's just the way it worked out.

My mom died in a house fire the spring of my freshman year. I spent most of my high school years dealing with the fallout of that event. I lived in a 2 bedroom apartment with a young man from my church and kind of raised myself. It was all kinds of awkward.

Now I'd like to tell you that throughout those years I did it all the right way. But as a teenager with too much independence and not enough guidance, I made some serious mistakes. By my Junior year, I was headed in the wrong direction. I was gravitating toward a group of kids who were not good for me. I was getting involved in somethings that were very unhealthy. It was not good.

The one saving grace that I had at that time was church. I grew up at First Baptist Church of Waverly, TN. It was a small county seat church a lot like any church you see in towns that size all over the south. But that church was filled with some really great people who cared about me.

Mom and dad had always been very invested in that church and they made sure that I was invested too. There was never a time that I was allowed to miss a Sunday morning, Sunday night or Wednesday night. I guess you could say we went to church religiously!

Anyway, after mom died, that habit of going to church didn't change for me. I still went all the time just like I had been raised. I wasn't living for Christ Monday through Saturday, but on Sunday I was in church.

That church was filled with some really amazing Christ followers. During those hard years, I had a lot of people show me love in very practical, tangible ways. I didn't appreciate it at the time, but that didn't stop them from showing it to me anyway.

During the summer between my junior and senior year of high school our church had a picnic on this family farm owned by one of our church members. It was pretty much what you'd imagine. There were nearly 200 people running all over this farm. The kids were playing football, volleyball and wiffle ball while the adults sat around in lawn chairs and talked. The food was amazing - pulled pork barbecue, watermelon, you get the idea.

I sat at the picnic thinking how out of place I was. I wasn't serious about my faith at that time. I really didn't want to be there.

As the picnic wore on, a band started playing gospel music and everyone gathered around the front porch of the farm house. They were using it like a stage. After we sang for a while, they invited one of my classmates named Eddie to get up and speak. Eddie had felt called in to the ministry and this was his first time to ever speak in front of a crowd. You could tell from watching him that he was scared to death. Eddie stood at the microphone and talked for about 5 minutes. He trembled, his voice was shaky — in short, he was terrible!

I sat there at the back of the group all alone and listened to Eddie just torture this talk, thinking, *What a loser! I could do so much better than that.* I told you I wasn't in a very good place! I kid you not, at that moment, God spoke to me. I know it can sound strange to hear someone claim that, but that's what happened. I clearly heard God say to me, *If you could do so much better, then why aren't you? Look at yourself! You're wasting your life and heading in the wrong direction.*

I couldn't shake it off. From that moment all I could think about was that God was calling me to give my life to something. At that age I had no idea what my future would look like, I just knew that I was meant for more. I was meant to serve the church of Jesus Christ with my life.

A year later I headed off to Cumberland College in Williamsburg, KY. It's a small Christian school in the mountains and it was just what I needed. For the first time in my life I encountered a large group of people MY OWN AGE who were living for Christ.

People like Robert, Ron, Joe and Bob just exemplified living for Christ right in front of me. As a mountain school, Cumberland had a lot of kids who were poor. But if one of them had a need, the Christ Followers all banded together, chipped in and helped.

I remember one time, Ron got a speeding ticket. It was an honest mistake. Ron rolled through a speed limit change without realizing it and he got pulled over. Ron was devastated. He was flat broke and had no idea how he was going to pay the fine. When word got out among the other Christians, everyone chipped in and raised enough money to pay the ticket.

When Ron told the judge how he got the money to pay the fine, the judge was so impressed that Ron was so well thought of that he threw the ticket out. It seemed like the whole campus celebrated with him!

That's just one example of how this community banded together. Young married students who couldn't afford to pay their rent would come home to find envelopes stuffed with cash stuck inside their front door. I'm telling you, it was like living in the days of the early church. I saw students living out **Philippians 2:5–7 5 Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus, 6 who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage. 7 Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men . . .**

I didn't understand it at the time, but that college community of Christ followers was functioning like a church in my life. They were a living laboratory where we figured out the secret sauce of what it means to be a Christ follower.

Those experiences at Cumberland coupled with the way my church family took care of me as a kid got me hooked on what can happen when a group of Christ Followers come together and choose to pour themselves out for the cause of Christ.

From that moment on, I wanted to be a part of stimulating believers to become a part of a dynamic, loving, growing community where we put our love for Jesus in to practice by doing what he says. Because when I'm a part of that, I get a front row seat, watching God change lives in a way that only He can.

Maybe you've seen Christ Followers take up their cross daily and live for sake of the gospel the way that I saw in my college days or maybe you've experienced the kind of love and support my hometown church showed me during my high school days.

You know how good it is to be around people who have made the decision to live for Christ with so much passion that it profoundly influences everyone they encounter.

OR, maybe your experience with Christians has been much the opposite. You've seen a lot of Christians who are petty and indifferent. They come across as the sin police — all they want to do is tell you everything you're doing wrong.

I hope that's not your story! But if it is, I want you to know, Jesus envisions something far greater for His followers.

When believers are following Christ at the highest possible level, there's nothing like it. And when those same Christ followers join together in something known as the local church, it can be the ride of a lifetime.

Now last week, we learned that following Christ means we make our love for Christ a tier 1 love. We looked at **MT 22:37–40** **37 He said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. 38 This is the greatest and most important command. 39 The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. 40 All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."**

Here Jesus is asked what the most important command in the OT might be. He answers definitively by saying that our first priority is to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind. Jesus talks about how we love God as our first priority when he says, **LK 9:23 . . . "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me.** According to Jesus, loving God supremely means everything else is stripped away. We die to our old selves and we become someone new in Christ. Nothing is allowed to compete with our affection for God. Nothing we own should ever compete with God. Nothing we do - no job, no hobby or interest should ever compete with our affection with God. According to Jesus, even our own family shouldn't compete with our total affection for God.

But that doesn't mean we don't love other people. When a Christ Follower takes on a singular love and devotion for God and loves him supremely, they learn to love others rightly as well. Loving others then is one of the hallmarks of what it means to be a Christ Follower. It's so visible! When love is missing, you can tell. If you want people around the community to think negatively about the church, just let the church behave in a way that is seen as judgmental or condescending rather than loving. People won't respect or admire the church, they'll hate it! Why is that? Because Christ himself has ordered us to love others. Second to loving God, we're to love others with the same kind of love we'd normally think of reserving for ourselves.

The question is, how do I do that? What does it look like to love other people more than I love myself?

Today let's think about the two different contexts a Christ Follower shows love. The first context is within the church. I had a college professor years ago who defined the church as a *body of baptized believers bought by the blood and bound by the Spirit!* I love that! What a

great definition. The church is a body of Christ Followers and Jesus has placed His followers into a context where they can learn to love one another.

Jesus is meeting with his disciples on the occasion of the last supper. This would be the final time he would eat with them before he was betrayed by Judas and crucified on a cross. Jesus knows what is going to happen to him. It's his last chance to give them instruction as a group. It's his last chance to influence their DNA as they are about to become an emerging church, launched under the power of the Holy Spirit just weeks after this conversation.

As you can imagine, the words that Jesus chooses to share in this moment are mission critical. So when Jesus commands his disciples to love one another, it's something that should get our attention.

John 13:34–35 ³⁴ “I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

I don't know about you, but when I look around right now at what is happening in our country, there seems to be a profound deficit of love. Especially the kind of love that Jesus is describing here.

C.S. Lewis was a well-known writer and theologian from Britain who lived through two world wars. He wrote books like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Mere Christianity*. He says there is a difference between what he calls “need love” and “gift love.” Need love is where I love you because you do something for me that I like. If a guy looks at his girlfriend and says, *I love you because you make me happy*, he's expressing need love. It makes you wonder, what happens when she stops making him happy?!! His love goes out the window!

On the other hand, gift love is the kind of love Jesus is talking about here. The idea is that I show you love without any expectations or demands. I give freely and joyfully without expecting I'll ever see a return on the investment of my love.

Jesus knows that this kind of love is scarce in the world.

We live in a world that's profoundly isolated from one another. We sit alone on our devices and we fire up our social media with some of the most unkind comments. We watch as protesters from one side of the political spectrum kills protesters from the other side of the political spectrum and we long for real, life changing love.

That's why Jesus commands Christ Followers to show gift love to one another. Because all around us we see people practicing need love. The moment the benefits to themselves dry up, the love dries up with it. That's a lonely, isolating way to live.

That's why Jesus calls on us as Christ Followers to love boldly and differently. Instead of living in isolation, we're to form into real communities known as the church and practice the same kind of love that Jesus has shown toward us.

I see so many wonderful flashes of that kind of love here at Celebration.

The other day I was talking with a woman from our church family. She'd recently gone through a pretty serious medical condition. Her small group has gone out of their way to show the love of Christ to her. She told me that even though she's out of work because of the health issue, their church family has been there for her every step of the way. Her small group had helped with groceries and money for her bills.

Over the years I've been blessed to watch this small group. Not only have they taken care of one another, they've also encouraged one another to minister in high touch, high cost ways. Several members of this small group have taken on the ministry of fostering kids who find themselves inside the system. As they've served under the leadership of the Spirit of God, the members of the small group have rallied around them and met the needs they've encountered by serving at such a high level. That group has learned beautifully that by loving God supremely, you can learn to love others more than they love themselves.

These aren't perfect people. Every one of them would tell you that they've got plenty of baggage. But they'd also tell you that following Christ by showing the same kind of Gift Love that Jesus has shown us has led them on a journey they never thought possible and it's changed their life.

When Jesus tells us to follow him, this is what he has in mind. We join together and create a compassionate, fruitful community while encouraging others to join in and become Christ followers.

Now when Christ followers are loving one another with the gift love, the kind of love that Christ himself showed, it doesn't stay inside the church. It becomes a platform from which we can show love to those far from God and influence them to follow him.

How exactly do we do that? Well it may sound a little cheesy, but we do that by bold sharing and bold caring. I don't alliterate very often! It always feels kinda corny to me when I do it. But let's run with it today!

Bold sharing! What's that all about? Well sharing with others about Jesus is a critical way to show love to those outside the church. That's what is behind Christ's mandate in **MT 28:18–20** **18 Then Jesus came near and said to them, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."**

Here, Jesus is sending his disciples into the world to make new disciples. If you're a Christ Follower, Jesus intends for you to be a full time missionary. Typically, we think of missions as what happens in other nations. It's true that God has a heart for all nations and peoples. No matter who they are or where they're from, God has the desire to reconcile everyone to himself in Christ, and our church has a responsibility to be a part of it.

I'm so excited any time we send a team to another country or have someone step forward to make a far longer commitment to serving somewhere overseas. One of the great tragedies of the spread of the Corona Virus is how it's effectively turned off our opportunity to travel overseas and live out this command of Christ in that particular way.

But the great commission is also about what happens in Tallahassee and Thomasville and Sopchoppy or wherever we are. We are the missionaries that God has sent right here in our own backyard.

So what is Jesus telling us as Christ Followers in this passage? He's telling us that he has placed his full authority, his authority over everything in both the physical and spiritual realm, behind his command to share His love with our neighbors, friends, family and coworkers – anyone who will listen.

This verse breaks down so beautifully. We're to Go: That means we should be both talking and showing the love of Christ to others face to face. We're to engage them in to the body of Christ, that's what baptism is all about. Baptism is how we identify with the death and resurrection of Christ, but it's also how we identify with the church as well.

If the body is the laboratory where we learn what it means to love other people, wouldn't we want our friends and family to experience that kind of love? Wouldn't we want them to be a part of that kind of community? You bet!

Then as we engage them and bring them into the body, we help them learn the word - we teach them to obey everything Christ has commanded.

Not long ago I was talking to one of our young dads out in front of our church. His wife is expecting a new child and we were celebrating that. As we talked he began to reflect over the last few years when his family had first come to Celebration. Their marriage had some serious flaws and things weren't good at all. But this couple came to know Christ. They heard about Jesus in a way that influenced them. They saw a community of people that loved one another. Then they experienced that love for themselves. They saw people reach out to them and extend friendship to them. They saw people who rejoiced with them when they added a child. They saw people who were there for them when they grieved during times of tragedy. They saw people who encouraged them when they were in difficult seasons professionally. As they did life as a part of the church, they didn't do life alone. They did life as a part of this wonderful, loving community known as the church.

Now don't get me wrong, it wasn't all perfect! Along the way they encountered some snarky people too! That's just part of it. I wish everybody in church was perfect, but that's not true! But even the snarky people serve a useful function. They help us understand what it's like to love someone who is difficult and that's not a bad lesson to learn.

So this couple learned. They got engaged in a discipleship group and they've just really flourished.

Now here they were a few years later with a solid marriage, an expanding family and a growing relationship with Christ. This young dad looks at me and said, *You know, if you'd have told me a few years ago I'd be standing here right now having this conversation with you I'd have never believed it. I can't tell you how much our lives have changed for the better.*

When he said that it just blew me away. Because in that moment, in those few words he affirmed an important part of the great commission. It's why Jesus sends Christ Followers out under his full authority. So that we can see people into the life of the church to experience the love that Christ calls us to express first hand and then grow, through the power of the Holy Spirit to keep all of his commands. That's the power of a relationship with Christ. It has a way of profoundly impacting our lives, and not just our lives in the here and now, but our lives into eternity as well.

That's what happens when there is bold sharing. People are drawn in to the church and the power of the gospel, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the power of a loving body are all brought to bear on someone's life and the result is pretty incredible.

That's bold sharing, What about bold caring? As Christ Followers, we are to care greatly about people around us who are in great need and we're to seek to meet those needs regardless of how someone might respond to our bold sharing.

Matthew 25:31–36 ³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you took care of Me; I was in prison and you visited Me.’

Jesus says that His followers are the ones who have enough wisdom to show overwhelming compassion to those who are in great need. Compassion is a key indicator of the kind of heart change he brings when someone accepts Him. This is huge. If you keep reading MT 25, it gets pretty dark. Those who don't respond with great compassion when they see need are rejected by Christ. There's just no way that someone who has been changed by a love relationship with God could then in turn ignore the needs of others.

I want you to think about this for a moment. Does the way you spend your money reflect this kind of compassion? Do you see the kind of generosity in your life Jesus is referring to here? What about how you spend your time? Do you give of yourself generously to serve and help others? This is the kind of practical compassion that Jesus says is the hallmark of a Christ Follower.

Let me tell you, the world around us is really hurting right now. The problems of inequality and poverty are staring us in the face. As Christ followers, we have an obligation to make a difference. We can't just ignore it.

Why? Because Jesus is telling me that it's his expectation for me. He's telling me the Gospel solution to the problem of inequality, poverty and the despair I see all around me is to love others as I love myself. That's what bold caring is all about.

Do you see how Jesus takes the abstract concept of loving others and makes it intensely practical? Every Christ Follower can do what Jesus is talking about here. We can get engaged in the life of the church and we can learn to love one another, then leverage that love into loving those around us.

Next weekend, we're relaunching on campus group life at Celebration. I told a story earlier about how one of those small groups has learned to demonstrate the love of Christ for one another. The members of that group will tell you, they don't know what they'd do without one another.

You can be involved in a group just like that one. Just come to Celebration next week, stop by the Team Celebration tent right out front and say "sign me up!"

Jesus commands us to show love to one another as Christ Followers and there's no better way to do that than to get involved with a group of people and live life with them.

That same group can also help you get your arms around bold sharing and bold caring with others. Those groups are engaged in serving those in great need as they serve in food pantries and clothing resource centers. They help kids going back to school find their supplies. They visit the sick, they do home repair for families in need. Over the years, some of those repairs have been extensive. Basically, they do whatever they can to show bold caring. There's no reason you can't be a part of that.

But it all starts with you stepping forward and saying, *I want to be a part of honoring the command of Christ by loving others both inside and outside the church.*

Imagine what would happen if Celebration became the kind of community that lived for Christ openly in front of our friends and neighbors. Imagine how attractive that would be for them to see that kind of love on display and then for them to be consistently invited to be a part of it.

Imagine how God would then use that love to change the lives of people you care greatly about. I want to be a part of that, don't you?

Because Jesus is inviting you to be a part of that kind of community today. The question you need to answer is simply this: What is standing between me and fulfilling Jesus command to follow him by loving others boldly? For some, it may be that you've never followed what Jesus says is our first priority, that is to love God. As I said at the beginning, you can't love others rightly if you don't love God rightly. Why not make the decision today that you'll accept God's offer of grace and commit yourself to loving Him? There is nothing more transformative than having a right relationship with God.

For others of you, maybe the thing holding you back from loving others in the way we've discussed today is that you've never been involved in a church body before. That kind of spiritual isolation really stunts your spiritual growth. You need to be in a body of believers. You may be thinking about a time that you got hurt badly in church and it made you walk away thinking, I'll never be around people like that again. I'm sorry about that past hurt, but are you really going to let an old injury keep you from fulfilling a command from Christ himself? You don't want to be that person!

Let's take a moment and just think through what needs to happen in our life so that we can love others as Christ commands. For the next few seconds, just dial all the noise of the day out of your mind and take a moment with God. PRAY