

The Path of Discipleship

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Preacher: Dr. Rudy Gray

[0 : 00] My name is Rudy Gray, and I'm the sorriest member of First Baptist Pickings. I have done four interims since we've been here.

Then we went through COVID, and when we were isolated, a couple of our grandkids would spend the night with us on Saturday night, and we would go upstairs and have family worship.

You might call it the variety hour, because I would have children's sermons that I'd had over the years, some of them on flannel graph. They would sit down, and one would pray, and one would read Scripture, and I'd play the saxophone.

Yeah, that's funny. It really is because I'm a perpetual beginner. After we got through with that, we'd give the sermon, and we'd have prayer, and then they're good to go.

But those were such special times for us because the family worship like that, it just meant a lot to us, especially with our grandkids during that time. Well, this morning I want to talk to you about something that's especially important to the church, to a Christian.

[1 : 12] Forty years I've prepared messages, and if you've prepared messages for 40 years, and somebody calls you and says, hey, would you preach for me? Then you say, oh, sure, because, you know, I've got these filing cabinets full of sermons, and I just pull out a folder and say, now that's one of my sweet ones.

That's one of my special ones. I'll pull that out and preach. But several weeks ago I developed a brand new sermon. I never preached it before. First time I preached it was a few weeks ago at Mount Moriah Baptist, and I'm going to be there next Sunday.

Their pastor has COVID. Seven or eight people in their church have it, and I'm going to preach to an empty auditorium with just the praise team, just me and the praise team and whoever's operating the camera.

So pray with us about that. But if you have your Bibles, turn with me to Mark chapter eight. When I prepared this message, three words captured my attention.

I want to say that God gave them to me. I want to say that God moved on my heart, but if you find that it's no good, then you'll know it was all my own doing. But it was the word follow, point one, the word follower, point two, and the word followed, point three.

[2 : 30] So I want you to look in Mark chapter eight, verse 34. And he summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, if anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? In an article entitled, The Disciple Driven Church, the writer made this observation. The church growth movement has failed. The church planning movement has failed.

The decline in attendance in evangelical churches continues. He further observed this. The church has gone from a movement that required the total commitment of its members to the point of death to one that literally begs for anyone to enter its doors.

The church in America is not transforming society, but culture is transforming us. The great British theologian, John R. W. Stott said, God is not pleased with superficial discipleship.

[3 : 46] And Romans 12, 2 says, don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. A disciple is a learner, a follower, a lifelong person committed to Jesus Christ.

And when churches do not make disciples, we invariably end up proclaiming a cheap grace. We cannot do discipleship.

We cannot be disciples unless we're born again and we continue to focus and follow Jesus Christ.

He's our leader. He's the head of the church. He's the Lord of our lives. He's our hope. He's our God. And he is the greatest servant leader that ever lived.

Plato, if you remember, if you're into the Greek philosophers, Plato had a disciple whose name was Aristotle. And when Rome conquered Greece, the philosophy of Aristotle, because Aristotle had disciples, the philosophy of Aristotle, which goes back to Plato, permeated the Roman Empire so much so that even though Greece was conquered, then Rome was Hellenized by the nation they conquered.

[5 : 12] Why? Because Plato had a disciple and Aristotle had disciples. Disciples of Jesus Christ should be making a more profound difference in the world than the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle in the Roman Empire.

We follow the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. I want you to look first at this word that I mentioned before. The first point is follow.

It's what every disciple of Jesus is called to do. And the word follow, when we look at the meaning of the word and we get into it, the word follow means to chase or pursue.

So we are to chase and pursue after Jesus and His truth. It's something that requires commitment and focus in order to do. Jesus said, here's how you do it.

It's not like He said, do this, love me, follow me, and He didn't tell us how. He specifically said, this is what you have to do to be a follower of mine. I want you to look in the text.

[6 : 21] In Mark 8 and verse 34, the first one is self-denial. Absolute and complete commitment. A life of self-centeredness, a life of selfishness, a life of self-focus, self-fulfillment, self-interest is ruled out in order that we might have a life that is Christ-focused and Christ-centric.

Matthew 7 and verse 21, Jesus said, not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Self-denial. He said, you must deny yourself, but what does that look like?

I mean, in today's world, how do we translate that? What does it look like to deny ourselves? I came across a poem by Bill Britton, and I want to read it to you.

You got it on the screen? You got it, okay. It's a little long. Can you bear with me? Maybe. Okay, here we go. When you are forgotten or neglected or purposely set at naught and you don't sting or hurt with the insult of the oversight, but your heart is happy being counted worthy to suffer for Christ, that is, dying to self.

When your good is evil spoken of, when your wishes are crossed, your advice disregarded, or your opinions ridiculed, and you refuse to let anger rise in your heart or even to defend yourself, but take it all in patient, loving silence, this is dying to self.

[7 : 53] When you lovingly, patiently bear any disorder, any regularity, and impunctuality, or any annoyance, when you come face to face with waste, folly, extravagance, spiritual insensibility, and endure it as Jesus endured it, that's dying to self.

When you are content with any food, any offering, any raiment, any climate, any society, any solitude, any interruption by the will of God, that is dying to self. When you never refer to yourself in conversation or to record your own good works or itch after commendation, when you can truly love to go unknown, that is dying to self.

When you can see your brother or sister have his or her needs met and can honestly rejoice in spirit and can feel no envy, no question God, while your own needs are far greater and in more desperate circumstances, that is dying to self.

When you can receive correction and reproof for one of less stature than yourself and can humbly submit inwardly as well as outwardly, finding no rebellion or resentment rising up within your heart, that is dying to self.

Jesus said that we are to deny ourselves. That's what we do when we follow Jesus. We deny ourselves. The second thing is to bear the cross.

[9 : 12] Notice what he says in the text. If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross. That's been misinterpreted a lot. Some people will talk about this, oh, that's my cross I have to bear.

And they talk about an illness they have, a condition they have, someone they have to care for or circumstances they're in. That's not the cross. And then other people say I'm going to carry the cross of Jesus.

No, you can't. That one's already taken and there was only one person that could carry that cross. But what it says, let him take up his cross. And there's no question, there's no doubt that in the New Testament world when they said cross, what they meant was an instrument of execution. In other words, when you take up your cross, you are committed to something to the point of death. And that's what Jesus meant.

The cross was an instrument of capital punishment. The new Greek international commentary said the phrase is used literally of carrying one's cross to the place of execution.

[10:25] and it's a daily experience. Not a one-time experience, but every day we pick up our cross, our commitment to Christ to the point of death and we walk.

Deny ourselves, take up our cross and then follow Christ. I'm not a Greek grammarian or a Greek scholar but I own shelves of books by people who are.

So when I studied this passage, I realized that this is a present tense verb that's in the imperative which means it is a commandment to keep on doing, keep on doing, keep on doing.

We sing wherever he leads, I'll go. But far too often we don't mean a word of it when we sing it. We're called to live the life of love.

Not a feeling that rises up inside of us not something the culture has defined for us but love as exhibited and explained in Jesus Christ and his word.

[11:37] in fact, 1 John 4, 19 says we love because he first loved us. Follow. That's what we're called to do.

Deny ourselves. Take up our cross and follow him. The second thing is follower. It is who a disciple is.

If you are a Christian, if you are born again, you are a follower follower of Jesus and part of that word disciple means to follow, means to learn and follow. If you and I and we do and we for many, many years across centuries, when we have a relationship with Christ, we call ourselves what? Christian. Thank you. Christian. Christian. Do you know the word Christian is only mentioned three times in the Bible? Three times and in every situation it seems that it's used as a term of derision, little Christ.

Used to put them down. But the term follower or disciple is used nearly 300 times in the New Testament. Imagine if you and I are talking to someone and they say, well, tell me something about yourself and you say, well, I'm a follower of Jesus.

[12:58] What do you think they're going to think? That you're a nut? Maybe. But if you say, I'm a follower of Jesus and they have enough respect for you, they'll say, what does that mean?

Then you get to share the gospel with them. If you say, I'm a Christian, they just kind of like water off a duck's back. It just rolls off. We are followers of Jesus Christ and that means four things.

A follower of Jesus Christ is a person who is more than a crowd. More than a crowd. In Matthew chapter 8 and verse 1, when he came down from the mountain, great multitudes followed him. But here's the question. Were they all disciples? When he came down from the mountain, great multitudes followed him and even in Mark 8 here, he said with the crowd and his disciples, once Jesus got his momentum on this earth, there was always a crowd around him.

Were they disciples? And the answer is no, they weren't because they didn't follow him. In fact, they even turned on him. In Matthew 27 and verse 22, Pilate said to them, that is the crowd of the multitude, what shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?

[14:19] And they all said, crucify him. You remember what many days removed from that when he came into Jerusalem and the crowds lined the street and they praised him and now some of the same people are saying, crucify him.

A disciple is more than part of a crowd and crowd mentality is a dangerous thing. Do you remember 1977, 1978, there was a man named Jim Jones.

Does anybody remember that? He started out in either Indiana or Illinois and he moved to California and he started something called a People's Temple and he gained the support of local politicians and even state politicians and even some in Congress and he had followers, lots of followers and they were brainwashed and the man became so enamored with his own power that he began to ask people to call him Father.

He implied to them that he was God. He performed phony miracles. One that is noted, is certified, is he purportedly removed a cancerous tumor from somebody's side behind this sheet and he had his assistants helping him and what they found out later was he took a bloody chicken liver and put it

on the side of the person and pulled it out and the person said, I'm healed and he held up the chicken liver and threw it away.

False prophet. When things got hot in California, he moved down to South America and created a place in Guyana called Jonestown.

[16:14] Congressman Leo Ryan and some other people on the delegation, they heard so many reports of abuse, they flew down there to see what was going on and the result of that is the congressman was killed, many other people and by the end of the time, 918 people either were shot or committed suicide including Jones himself.

He was a false prophet. Jonestown was a false coalition of people. They found themselves not following Jesus but following a man and they found themselves following a man that was not only deluded but was himself evil.

But it was a crowd and crowd mentality is dangerous. J. Vernon McGee and what I'm going to read to you, he wrote about 25 or 30 years ago.

He said, freedom is not following a multitude to do evil. If we were to follow God's precept, it would put us out of the marching, protesting, and rioting business.

Because it's not the crowd, it's disciples, it's people who follow Jesus and it's one by one, a change of heart, a change of heart, a change of heart that continues to deny self and take up the cross and follow him.

[17:34] It's a person that's more than a crowd. But a disciple is someone who believes, not just reacts. I've seen it in my ministry through the years.

There are people that will come to a service, maybe the music is just right, maybe the preaching is real strong, maybe there's an emotional appeal, and somebody will respond, and they'll get all excited, and they burn out quickly, and you don't see them again.

Matthew 8 and verse 19, Scripture says, a certain scribe came to him and said, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go. Now, if you'll notice something in that, this is a guy, Jesus is walking along the road, and there's a crowd, and he comes by this guy, and he says, Teacher, I'll follow you wherever you go.

Jesus didn't even call him. He volunteered. I'll follow you wherever you go. He reacted. He wasn't committed to, but he was reacting to something inside of himself.

In fact, Jesus would tell that man, in verse 20, the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. It was like Jesus was saying, look, you don't know what you're getting into.

[18:48] You don't know what it means to follow me. You've just volunteered for something that you have no idea what it's about. And you notice something else about this when this person volunteered.

Jesus didn't jump up and down and say, oh, goody, I've got another one in my group. He didn't say that. He said, you better watch it. Do you know what you're getting in for?

I don't even have a place to sleep tonight. Disciple is someone who believes, not just reacts. And then it's a witness who realizes dangers occur.

It's dangerous to be a follower of Jesus. You will get your feelings hurt. You will be misunderstood. You will be persecuted for something that you didn't even know you did.

You will be lied about if you follow Jesus. The disciples learned this. They learned their dangers in following Jesus.

[19:53] Here's one of the ways they learned it. Back in Matthew chapter 8 and verse 23, he got into the boat and the disciples followed him. they did not know what was coming but a sea quake occurred.

A lay lapse and it says and they were very afraid. Here they are sailing out on the sea of Galilee. Everything's going good. Jesus is asleep in the stern of the boat. This terrible storm comes up and some of these experienced fishermen are afraid.

They said Lord we perish unless you help them. So they woke them up. Jesus woke up. You know I often wonder how could he sleep through a storm like that? Because he's God. He is the embodiment of perfect peace.

So he gets up and he says to the wind stop and he says to the sea be still and now they're sailing on mirror water and there's no wind.

It was a miracle but then he turned and he looked to his disciples and he said why are you timid ye men of little faith? They were his chosen disciples. They would grow.

[20 : 54] They would change. They would continue being disciples and growing and growing. until as far as we know all of them died, were martyred for their faith, for following Jesus.

A witness who realizes this danger. But then the fourth thing is a believer who is growing in faith. You look at the life of Jesus and he finally comes to that place where he's arrested, goes to the mockery of a trial.

They find him guilty. They sentence him to execution. He dies on the cross. They thought they killed him but it was a predetermined plan of God that he died in our place for our sins.

Put him in a grave and he rose from the dead and then he appeared to the disciples and then move forward in the scene and Peter and some of the others go out fishing one morning and they look just on the shore and they see a figure and Peter realizes it's Jesus.

And he said it's the master and he jumps in the water and goes to Jesus and sits there. Jesus made breakfast for them and after breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter three questions.

[22 : 05] I think it makes a difference in the Greek because there are two different Greek words in play here. Jesus said Simon do you love me? And he used that word agape. Simon do you love me?

Simon Peter answered and said Lord you know I have great affection for you. Jesus said then take care of my sheep. Second time Jesus said do you love me? Do you agape me?

Simon Peter said Lord you know I have a great affection for you. He said well take care of my sheep. The third time Jesus said Peter do you have a great affection for me? And Peter said Lord you know.

He said then tend my sheep. Now after that Jesus has some tough news for Peter. He told him Peter this is how you're going to die.

You're going to die following me. This is what they're going to do to you. They're going to crucify you. You're going to die following me. That's hard news. That's tough news to get.

[23 : 04] What was his future like? He knew he was going to die for Jesus. He just got some really bad news. And then Jesus said to Peter follow me. And Peter still hasn't grown to the point that he would grow one day.

He says looking at John Lord what about that man? Doesn't that sound like us? There's some bad things happen to us and we may pray to God and say what about him?

He's worse than I am. Jesus' answer is well it's perfect. Jesus said to Peter if I want him to remain until I come what is that to you?

Follow me. It's not what's happening to somebody else that determines our relationship with God. It's the quality of our following him ourselves.

Followers of Jesus. That's what we're called to be. And the last thing I want you to see is followed. If I weren't a Baptist I'd get excited about this verse.

[24 : 16] The most forgotten verse is the probably in the whole book of Psalms. Certainly in Psalm 23 verse 6. Surely or only goodness and loving kindness mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The older theologians used to call this loving kindness or goodness and mercy. They used to call that the hounds of heaven. And he says will follow me.

Same emphasis of the word. Will chase after me. Will hunt me down. That's for us who follow Jesus. Something's following us. And God's put on our trail goodness and mercy.

We don't usually see it until we look back but it's always following us. It's a promise we can believe. Goodness supplies our needs. And loving kindness or mercy blots out our sins.

They follow us. That's comforting. That's encouraging. That's helpful to know that whatever I'm going through or whatever I'm facing whatever turn the road takes in life that I'm traveling behind me following on my trail pursuing me chasing after me is goodness and mercy.

[25 : 36] I asked Brian if he would sing that song Angels from the Realm of Glory this morning. You might wonder why are we singing a Christmas song and it's not even December?

Well I asked him to. And the reason I did is because I think there's a story that illustrates Psalm 23 6 very good.

There was a man who lived in the 1800s. He died in 1864. His name is a British journalist named James Montgomery. His parents were Moravian missionaries. They died on the mission field and

as a result he ended up going from house to house sometimes living on the street sometimes homeless.

At 21 he was a failure at school. He kept trying to keep failing. At 21 he got a job at a radical newspaper. I think that's what happened to people that can't get a job anywhere else.

They get a job with the Baptist Courier or newspaper or something. But he got a job at a radical newspaper called the Sheffield Register. Under pressure the editor sold the paper to Montgomery. [26 : 37] He somehow got enough money together and bought the paper. At 23 he was fined \$100 and sentenced to three months in jail for his writings. Radical writings.

And they were radical because they were so Christian. At age 25 he was fined \$150 and sentenced to six months in prison. And during those six months in prison he started writing a book.

He called it, he called his book Prison Amusements and had it published. And when he got out of prison to his surprise the book was a bestseller.

The newspaper circulation was the highest it had ever been and he had become a celebrity. He said I almost wrote the judge who sentenced me a thank you note for sending me to prison.

He grew stronger and stronger in his Christian faith. By the age of 40 it's written of him that he was the leading citizen in Sheffield. He was recognized even though he was not a preacher.

[27 : 42] He was recognized as a careful student of the word of God. And at 45 he wrote something that was in 1816 that continues to live today.

Angels from the realm of glory. He wrote that on the Christmas Eve edition of the Sheffield Register. in James Montgomery's life as he followed Jesus and all the bad things that happened to him there were hounds from heaven that kept on his trail and he was blessed.

And he gave us a song that lives on until today. Well the last part of followed the reality of hope. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Or I will dwell in the family of the Lord forever. It's confident assurance. The reality of hope.

Goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.

That's encouraging enough. And then I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. forever. Can I tell you something? It doesn't get any better than that.

[29 : 03] That's good. That's encouraging. That gives us confidence. Charles Spurgeon is my pastor of history. And I've been going through Spurgeon for the last two years reading in my devotions.

But Spurgeon said this. Question. When we die. Then he said. While I'm here I will be a child of God at home with my God.

The whole world will be his house to me. And when I ascend into the upper chamber I shall not change my company nor even change the house. I'll only go to dwell in the upper story of the house of the Lord forever.

Boy that blessed me when I read that. It says I'm in the house of God now. I'm in the family of God now. And then when I die I'm just going to go upstairs. What a thought.

What a God. What a great opportunity to be a follower of Jesus Christ. That's the path of discipleship.

[30 : 07] Something follows us. Goodness and mercy. Someone has called us Jesus Christ. Something has been explained very vividly to us. Deny yourself.

Take up your cross. Follow him. Simple isn't it? But we can't do it without the power of his Holy Spirit.

Not just one day. But every single day. I want you to bow your heads with me. Our musicians are going to play something for us.

And Roger Smith is going to come and lead us in prayer. But I want you to think about this. Think about these words. Deny myself. Take up my cross. Be committed to the point of death.

And follow Jesus. Deny myself. Take up the cross. Follow Jesus. Think about those words. Ask yourself, am I doing it? Lord, help me to do it.

[31 : 10] Father, take your word. Apply it to our heart. Move us to see and do what you want us to be. help us truly to be disciples of yours who deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow you.