

ONE

ACCEPT JESUS' INVITATION

JOHN 1:6-9, 19-36; 1:35-51

When we speak of seeing what Jesus wants us to see or hearing what Jesus wants us to hear, we are really talking about perceiving and discerning. For people who live with vision or hearing loss, perception and discernment come about by way of avenues other than sensory input. Of course, we all use many senses to perceive and discern.

Jesus invited all to follow him. Scripture tells us the invitation came in different ways. Many had heard of this rabbi, or teacher, through friends and word of mouth. There were many other teachers in his time, but something about this man from Nazareth compelled many to come and see what he was saying.

The foundational essay author for this practice tells a brief story about her dog, Zippy, that gets at the heart of Jesus' invitation.

As Zippy does sometimes when he has something to show me, he sat nearby, staring at me and frequently signaling that he wanted me to follow him. I instinctively said, "Zippy, do you have something to show me?" As I got up to follow him to his prize, I realized, "Oh, *this* is what Jesus means when he says, "Come and see!" Jesus invites us to follow him to God. If we get up and follow him, we will join an eternal company of others who also seek to draw near to God.

Even when "follow me" has the tone of instruction, it is always Jesus inviting people to join him so he can show them something, something that he knows they've been looking for. In fact, Jesus is also inviting them to see what God is looking for: them. Jesus came to save the world God loves, not to condemn it, and what Jesus wants us to see is that God loves. Accepting Jesus' invitation means we are choosing to see what Jesus shows us.

INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE

Jesus showed people God's love for the world and what it looks like to live a life rooted in the two greatest commandments to love God and others. Jesus reminded people through his actions and teachings to protect the weak and oppressed, the vulnerable, and those least valued by society. Jesus exhorts, invites, instructs, and welcomes us to follow him, not because of who *he* is, as though Jesus was the leader of a personality cult. Rather, in his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus leads us to redeemed fellowship with God and all that God loves.

✦ How did you hear about Jesus for the first time and what was your reaction?

Close your eyes and settle into silence. Take a few deep breaths, breathing out the distractions of daily life and breathing in a sense of God's enduring presence. Then open your eyes and reflect on the following:

Jesus says, "Come and see!"

What evidence do you see around you of God's love?

Jesus says, "Come and see!"

Where—in the lives of people, in structures of power, in the wounds of the world—do you see a yearning for God's love to be made real?

Jesus says, "Come and see!"

What is it that you need in order to see what Jesus desires you to see?

End by again settling into an interval of silence.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, called the Synoptic Gospels because they include many of the same stories, Jesus calls four fishermen by the Sea of Galilee. Jesus extends the invitation to follow him, and they respond by dropping their nets immediately to go with him. But John's Gospel presents a different perspective. In John 1:35–51, we learn of other ways Jesus called and people responded to him.

Take a few minutes to read John 1:35–51 before continuing.

Even in just this one passage, there are clearly different ways of becoming disciples, of following Jesus. John the Baptist's disciples aren't called or invited by Jesus, for example. They just start tagging along. Then, one of them goes and gets his brother, saying, "We've found the Messiah." Andrew brings his brother, Simon, to Jesus, who looks Simon over and gives him a new name: Peter. Still, so far, there is no invitation or instruction from Jesus to "follow me." That doesn't happen until the next day, when Jesus finds Philip in Galilee and says, "Follow me." At this point, Philip, now a disciple, goes and finds Nathanael and says, "We've found the one the prophets wrote about." How does Nathanael become a disciple? By hearing what Jesus says *to* someone else *about* him *as* he's walking toward him.

Besides the Twelve, others were called as disciples of Jesus. Some of them are unexpected:

- Johanna and Susanna, women who accompanied Jesus and provided support for his ministry (Luke 8:1–3)
- Mary and Martha of Bethany, friends who offered him hospitality (Luke 10:38–42; John 11)
- Mary Magdalene, the first to testify to Jesus' resurrection (John 20:11–18)
- Joseph of Arimathea, who took Jesus' body for burial (Luke 23:50–55)

In the end, no matter how they join the crew, they are choosing to follow Jesus for particular reasons. They're not just following some random guy, and they wouldn't have followed without a reason. In all the Gospel passages about the calling of the disciples, either they have heard of him already (inferred from the text) or they have a personal encounter. At the beginning, they cannot know him fully, but they know him enough to willingly change the direction of their lives. Perhaps we can say that, even though the *how* is different, the *why* is broadly the same; they follow Jesus to be with him and to learn from him. They accept the invitation because of who Jesus is.

No one was forced to follow Jesus. He never said, “Follow me or else!” as some highway signs threaten. The overall tone of the passage is to “come and see.” It is as though Jesus is leading the disciples on a walking tour of God’s love and justice taking shape in embodied lives.

We see, in the various invitations Jesus extends, that we become disciples in different ways. People have different needs and are attracted to different aspects of what Jesus taught. But what we learn from this passage—and what is echoed later in the Gospel, for example, in chapter 10—is that Jesus leads by inviting and caring. We follow because of what we receive, and we gather other people into discipleship when their interest perks up by hearing, “Come and see.”

TESTIMONY

In the Gospel of John’s account, John the Baptist testifies to the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, and the disciples testify to one another about the reality of that truth. Christian Methodist Episcopal Bishop Thomas Hoyt Jr. describes the two dimensions of the Black church’s practice of testimony: one is where witnesses testify to the church and world about the actions of God, and the other is where witnesses tell God the truth about themselves and others. Many witnesses have testified, not only with their words, but with their bodies, their actions, and their very lives. The practice of testimony has prepared many Black Christians in the US to take action for justice in the face of oppression. As Hoyt tells it, “The power of testimony is to give voice to the faith that lets people run on to see what the end’s gonna be.”¹ In testimony, we witness to the hope of what we may find when we respond to the call to “come and see.”

Think about your experience of Jesus’ invitation and your response.

- ➔ Did a friend or parent tell you about Jesus?

- ➔ Did you follow immediately?
Sporadically?

1. Thomas Hoyt Jr., “Testimony,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 102.



FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Following Jesus has always had real consequences. A life of authentic discipleship will not make one rich or popular, despite what prosperity preachers promise. Those who most eagerly flocked to hear Jesus and follow him were those left aside and pushed aside—people who were poor, sick, captive—by a complicity of political and religious authorities. Yet, even those well off, who had nothing to gain monetarily, realized he spoke the truth, transformed lives, and offered a vision of God’s desire to reconcile the world and save it. They risked all and followed him.

In brief, after Jesus died and was resurrected, many of his followers prayed about how to carry on this movement. In Acts 2 we learn of the birth of what became the Christian church through the story of the Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit infused followers with understanding that they were now the body of Christ. Since then, worshiping communities and individual Christians invite others to follow Jesus and accept his invitation. The ways people follow Jesus vary as well.



WORSHIP

In Christian worship, we gather to praise God. Almost every worship service includes an invitation to accept Jesus’ invitation to become a disciple. This can be as simple as the opening sentences that express God’s invitation to gather as Christ’s body, or an emotional altar call where time is spent allowing the Holy Spirit to move people to *hear* and accept the invitation. When we come to hear the Word read and preached, we also sharpen our sight so that we can see what Jesus wants us to see.

When we join the church, we accept Christ’s invitation to join him as his disciple. Presbyterians ask new members this question, which is a way of formalizing their desire to follow Jesus:

Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and mission through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

I will, with God’s help.

—*Book of Common Worship*, p. 431

- If you attend worship, where do you regularly hear Jesus’ invitation to follow him during the service?
- What part is most meaningful to you?

HELPING OTHERS HEAR AND ACCEPT JESUS' INVITATION

As the body of Christ, churches and worshiping communities are tasked with extending this invitation to others. In the first century, Christians met in house churches, many headed by women. Christians shared their resources and struggled to be faithful in the hostile environment of the Roman Empire. Today, Christian denominations work to build disciples in many ways.

- The United Methodist Building H.O.P.E. project has two primary goals: equip leaders and help congregations develop a culture of discipleship. See bit.ly/FMUMInsight.
- The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Matthew 25 initiative calls churches to a loving commitment to radical and fearless discipleship. Visit bit.ly/FMMatthew25.

Early on, Christians were confronted with accusations that they were against the Roman Empire because they refused to call the emperor *Lord*. Saying that only Jesus was Lord was a revolutionary and traitorous act. Today, many Christians face the accusation that they are unpatriotic when they denounce government policies that are hostile to vulnerable people or when they criticize leaders who advocate such policies.

- ➔ What risks, if any, have you taken by being a Christian?

Following Jesus means taking risks, including risking persecution for faithful action. Some examples include:

- Stephen who was stoned to death (Acts 7:54–8:2)
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian, who voluntarily returned to Germany to participate in the resistance against Hitler. He was killed in the Flossenbürg concentration camp two weeks before it was liberated.
- Fannie Lou Hamer, a Civil Rights leader, worked for voting rights for Black Americans. Drawing on her deep faith, she engaged in courageous actions and taught others about Jesus through powerful songs and speeches.
- Many churches have declared themselves sanctuary churches, protecting immigrants facing persecution in their home countries but unwelcomed by the US government.
- List other examples.

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Whether just beginning or somewhere down the road, you are on a journey of discipleship too. Take some time to consider your journey.

➤ When and how do you remember first hearing Jesus' invitation to follow him?

➤ What did that initial acceptance look and feel like?

➤ What have been some memorable events (i.e., joyful, painful, transformative) in your journey so far?

➤ How do you say yes to this invitation today?

Again, following Jesus is a choice for every person. He never forced anyone to follow him. When we do say yes, there are real risks we have to assume. And when we say yes to one thing, we are also saying no to another. If we say yes to a vanilla milkshake, we are saying no to a chocolate milkshake. If we say yes to following Jesus, we are saying no to following ourselves. We are saying no to anyone who is not Jesus and anything that goes against what he taught. This choice can have real life-and-death consequences.

By following Jesus, I say no to:

What costs or risks are involved for you?

NO

YES

And I say yes to:

What positive things do you receive?

FOLLOWING JESUS

We have seen that following Jesus is different for everyone he calls. Some hear from others, some hear directly, some stumble on this path, and others seek it. However it happens, we all make a decision whether or not to follow him as he leads us to draw near to God. For those who do follow, it is a transformative journey, sometimes challenging and risky, but we are always assured of his loving presence as we go where he leads.

As you end this session, close your eyes and settle into silence. Take a few deep breaths, breathing out the distractions of daily life and breathing in a sense of God's enduring presence.

