

The True Believer • 1 John 5:1–5

Some people have very strong beliefs. They become impassioned about their political convictions. They are willing to fly a plane into a building to prove a point even though it is an act of suicide. They are so devoted to their sports team that they wear the team colors come victory or defeat. They plaster stickers on the back windows and bumpers of their cars to announce loyalty to a particular music group. They are convinced that their doctor, prescription or homeopathic remedy is the sure cure. They are true believers.

True believers are different from those who are curious or on the fringe. They are really serious. Their belief is the center of their lives. It controls their relationships and everything else they do. They are passionate about what they are convinced is true. They are willing to even die for their cause.

I invite you to become a true believer in Jesus Christ. Radical. Committed. Absolute. Devoted. 100%.

The New Testament calls someone who is a true believer a “disciple of Jesus Christ”. There is a huge difference between a cultural Christian and a true disciple. A cultural Christian is someone who has grown up in the context of Christianity - - the person who celebrates Christmas and Easter, who knows the basic stories of the Bible, who tries to live out basic Christian values. A cultural Christian may have been baptized and joined a church. By contrast, a disciple is someone whose whole life is centered in the person of Jesus Christ. A disciple is the follower of a person rather than a tradition or a set of values.

The true believer is fed up with ordinary life. She is tired of her own selfishness. He is weary of life without meaning or purpose. They want something more, much more. The true believer is ready to devote body, mind and soul completely to Jesus Christ the Son of God. The true believer

isn’t worried about the crowd. This person is ready to be a disciple if no one else in the whole world agrees or comes along. The true believer is convinced there is no better way.

Being a disciple of Jesus is the smartest and best thing anyone can ever do. She knows that radical discipleship will completely transform her life for good. She knows that being a disciple will get her to heaven forever. But, it is neither the transformation nor heaven that motivates the true believer. He is attracted to Jesus himself far more than to any benefits he may gain.

Anyone interested in being a disciple of Jesus must understand where discipleship begins. It begins with the leadership of a God who loves us. Not because we are so lovable but because God is a lover. Love is the very essence of who God is. 1 John 3:1 says, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us.” The love of God is lavish. It is not dependent on our attractiveness, our goodness or our accomplishments. God simply loves us for who we are.

One of the problems of celebrity and wealth is that it can be difficult to know why someone loves you. When someone becomes a famous athlete, movie star, musician,

politician, business leader or person of great wealth there are many people who are attracted to you. They laugh at your jokes. They listen to your ideas. They want to be with you. They invite you to parties and place you in positions of leadership and influence.

But, you may wonder if they really like you for who you are or merely tolerate you because of your fame or power. If it weren’t for your money or position, would they have anything to do with you? If you lost your money, fell from fame or went to prison, how would they treat you then?

You need never worry about God. God is not impressed by success or repulsed by failure. He loves you just for you: rich or poor; failure or success; beautiful or ugly; healthy or sick; young

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or old. God loves you. And, he loves you whether you love him back or not. The love of God is a most unusual and wonderful thing!

And so is God's grace. James 1:5 teaches us that "God . . . gives generously to all without finding fault." God is not only a lover but also a giver. He gives life and forgiveness and love and kindness and help and hope and more.

One of the most frequently used words in the New Testament is the word "grace" which refers to the generosity of God. One of my favorite lines in the Bible is 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." That is the way God is. He is willing to become poor in order to make us rich. He loves to be generous!

God's greatest generosity is called salvation. This is when he saves us from our sin to give us eternal life. Ephesians 2:8-9 says that "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast."

God's love for us is infinitely beyond our comprehension. But God's grace toward us seems to be outrageous. God forgives when people don't deserve forgiveness. God repeatedly gives second and third and hundredth chances. God is kind to people who hate and abuse him. There are people against whom all of us would seek vengeance and evil, but God is good and generous.

There have been times when I have been too embarrassed to ask God for help. I've sinned the same sin that I've confessed over and over again. I've treated others poorly. I've not prepared when I should have. I've squandered the blessings God has given to me. I've totally messed up. I've prayed and told God that I don't deserve his forgiveness; I don't deserve his help; I wouldn't blame him for giving up on me. Then it is as if I hear God say, "I haven't given up on you. I want to forgive you. I want to help you. I want what is best for you. I delight to be outrageously generous to you over and over again."

God goes first. God takes the initiative. God seeks us out. God loves us. God is outrageously generous and gracious to us. And the greatest

expression of that is that he gives to us Jesus. John 3:16 tells us, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Jesus was and is God's Son. He is the embodiment of God. He is the means of our receiving God's love and grace. God the Father took the initiative to send Jesus to live on earth, die for us on the cross to take the penalty of our sins and return to life to prove we have eternal life. Jesus is our connection to God. Jesus is the channel for us to receive God's love. Jesus is the means of God's grace. Jesus is the one and only basis of our eternal salvation.

God has done all this. He has reached out to us. He has given us love, grace and Jesus. Next, it is our choice how to respond. The obvious response is to say, "If that's what you'll do for me, I'll follow you anywhere." Those who respond to the leadership of God and want to follow him are called disciples of Jesus Christ.

"Follower-ship" requires believing. To be a disciple means believing in Jesus Christ. First and most obvious, we must believe the facts about Jesus. The simplest statement of facts to believe is in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: ". . . that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

But, there's more to it than that. To be a disciple is to truly believe that Jesus is all that the Bible teaches he is. He is supernatural. He is the only way to God. He can do anything.

True believers always go beyond mental belief. True belief is about feeling and will. I don't just 'think' my belief in Jesus, I 'feel' it! Where there are not emotions, there is no belief. Feelings are not contrary to intellect, but they certainly are different.

Several years ago I talked with a man whose engagement had recently been broken. They cancelled their wedding plans. When I asked him what happened he said, "It was logical for us to get married, but we didn't feel anything for each other." I'm glad they broke up.

When I married Charleen I truly believed it was the smartest choice I could make. It made sense. But it was also a matter of the heart and

will. I felt a passion and commitment to her that caused me to pledge the rest of my life to her, no matter what.

Do you believe in Jesus? Are you convinced he is the Son of God who died on the cross and rose from the dead? Do you feel for him? Is there an emotional attachment to him, a passion, an attraction, a desire and an indescribable connection of the heart? Do you choose him? Do you want to follow him? Do you want to give your life to him? Do you want to belong to him?

You may respond by thinking, "I'm not quite sure. I guess I'm more of a fringe believer, a partial believer, an almost-disciple." Well then let me ask you - - - would you like to be a true believer? Would you like to totally commit yourself to someone other than yourself? Would you like to believe so much, so completely that you become a fully committed disciple of Jesus?

That's the choice for each of us to make: to choose to believe in something and someone greater than ourselves; to go beyond reason and experience; to believe with all our being. It is called faith. Faith is an all-out total belief with everything we are and have.

"Follower-ship" means believing, but "follower-ship" also means loving. Jesus called his disciples to the highest, greatest, most intense love when he said in Matthew 22:37, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

To be a disciple is to love Jesus Christ. Love is beyond adequate definition, but we all know what it means. To love is to believe in, but it is also more than that. Love is this deep feeling, this deep commitment, this caring, this concern. When you love someone that person stands out from everybody else in the crowd.

If someone you love is in a group photograph, that person is the one you first look to see. If someone you love speaks, you are quick to listen. When you are away from the person you love, that person keeps coming to your thoughts. When you love someone, their feelings, thoughts, touch and

presence are more important to you than anything else.

As a disciple of Jesus Christ I often say, "Jesus, I love you." Sometimes those are my first conscious words in the morning. Words of love to Jesus are part of my daily prayers. When I hear others swear his name or speak unkindly about him, I feel myself getting defensive - - because I love him. When I ignore him, displease him or hurt his feelings, I feel lousy - - because I love him. What he says and thinks and feels is all-important to me because I love him!

A disciple loves Jesus with heart and soul and mind. Do you love Jesus like that? Would you like to love him that way?

I want to share with you a promise from the Bible, but something needs to be said first. When you truly love someone, you don't focus on what you will get out of it. Parents don't love their babies with the expectation that they will take care of them when they are old. That may happen, but that's not the way true love works. When we love God, we love God just for himself. We love him if everything goes right and we love him if everything goes wrong. We just love him!

But there is an astonishing benefit nonetheless. Romans 8:28 tells us, "We know that in all things God works for good for those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." God works for good in the lives of everyone who loves him. What a spectacular promise and benefit!

A disciple of Jesus Christ believes and loves and obeys. Jesus said in John 14:18, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." 1 John 5:3 explains that, "This is love for God: to obey his commands."

Being a disciple of Jesus means that I truly follow him. I do what he wants. I go where he sends. I'm committed to doing things his way. As a disciple I choose to behave like Jesus whether I feel like it or not. I obey what Jesus says about prayer, forgiving others, sexual activity, helping the poor, managing money, the way I

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treat other Christians, baptism, church involvement and everything else. If I don't do what Jesus says, I am not Jesus' disciple!

The problem is that even the best disciples don't always do what we are supposed to do. Does that mean that anyone who fails isn't a disciple? Isn't this too high a standard? Isn't it impossible to really be a Christian? In the same verse of I John 5:3 that tells us to obey God's commands we are also told that God's "commands are not burdensome."

How does this work? Let's look at some of Jesus' last words in Matthew 2:19-20: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

To be a disciple is to be taught to obey all Jesus says. A disciple is someone who commits to obey and then spends a lifetime learning what that means.

A disciple is committed to do whatever Jesus says about being baptized, although that person may not yet know what Jesus says about being baptized. A disciple is someone who promises in advance to handle money the way Jesus wants money handled although it may take some learning to really know how to do that. A disciple is like a soldier who has pledged to obey every order of a superior officer when the battle begins but probably won't know what those orders are until after the battle starts.

Let's put it all together. God leads with his love, grace and Jesus. We follow with our belief, love and obedience.

There are some days when I think I am a fully committed follower of Jesus. I believe with my mind, emotions and will. I love him with all my heart. I promise I will do whatever he asks me to do without hesitation or reservation. But, there

are other days when I'm not so sure. I have my doubts. I'm a lousy lover. I am prone to disobey.

Whatever I have or haven't been in the past, I choose to be Jesus' disciple today and forever. Will you join me in that commitment? Will you affirm your absolute belief in Jesus? Will you commit to love Jesus with all your heart, soul and mind and to obey him completely?

I invite you to reflect on whether or not you are a fully committed follower of Jesus and if you want to be. If you want to be, pray this short prayer: "God, I choose to be Jesus' disciple. 100%. Without reservation! I believe in Jesus as my Savior from sin. I love Jesus with my heart, soul and mind. I will obey whatever you ask me to do. I promise this in Jesus' name. Amen."

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