

Apprenticing To Jesus | *Being With Jesus*

Mark 3:14

Last week, we launched into a brand-new ministry season and a message series called, *Apprenticing to Jesus*. The word *apprenticeship* might feel like it applies more to *plumbers* and *electricians* than *Jesus-followers*, but when Jesus called people to join him, he wasn't looking for members for a new social club, supporters of a political campaign, adoring fans to cheer him on, or even adherents to a new religion; Jesus called people to be his *disciples*—a first-century term meaning *apprentices*. To be a *disciple* in the first century, as we saw last week, was a privilege reserved for only the best of the best of the absolute *best*—like a PHD-program at an Ivy League school. *Apprenticing* under a *rabbi* meant submitting not just to their teaching, but their entire way of life—going everywhere they went, living 24/7 with them, being shaped by their ideas, adopting their values, emulating their behaviours, until resembling them in every way.

That was the goal of every first-century disciple—to *be with* your rabbi, to *become like* your rabbi, and to eventually learn to *do* everything your rabbi *did*. It was this kind of rigorous apprenticeship program that Jesus invited his followers into. Except, shockingly, as we saw last week, what made Jesus' PHD-level, Ivy League apprenticeship program so unique was that he opened it up to not just *the best of the best of the best*, but to *anyone* and *everyone*; welcoming ***“whoever wants to be my disciple...”*** (Matt 16:24)— a *whoever* that today includes *you* and *me*!

Now, our world has changed a lot since the first century, but *“Apprenticing to Jesus”* continues to revolve around these same 3 goals—*being with* Jesus, *becoming like* Jesus, and learning to *do what Jesus did*. For the next 3 weeks, we'll look at all 3 of these goals, beginning today with the *first*, and perhaps most *essential*, goal—the call, as apprentices, to *be with Jesus*.

The invitation to *be with Jesus* is a core to all four gospels: *Matthew, Mark, Luke & John*.

The Gospel of *Matthew* is beautifully bookmarked with this idea. It begins, in chapter one, with an angel telling Joseph that the soon-to-be born Jesus would be, “**God with us**” (*Matt 1:23*) and concludes—in the last sentence of the last chapter—with the risen Jesus promising:

“...surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (*Matthew 28:20*)

Matthew envelopes the entire gospel story in a vision of God being *with us* in Jesus.

In *Mark’s* Gospel, Mark writes that Jesus called his disciples, “**that they might be with him**.” (*Mark 3:14*) That was the invitation—to *be with him*. Once *with him*, his apprentices would be closely mentored and eventually sent out on missional assignments to replicate the very things they saw their master doing. But the initial ask was to simply *be with Jesus*.

Luke, describes the impact of this apprenticeship strategy in his Gospel-sequel, the *Book of Acts*, where he details how, in the days following Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, his apprentices caused such a great commotion in Jerusalem—the very place Jesus had just *been crucified*. After replicating one of Jesus’ *miracles* and then preaching a very Jesus-like *sermon*, the very people who’d just killed Jesus now had *them* arrested, and charged with, well... being *too much like Jesus*. These religious leaders were in shock as they witnessed the life and work of Jesus now being replicated and multiplied through his apprentices. And Luke notes,

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished, and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.
The Acts of the Apostles 4:13

No PhDs; no Ivy League degrees—just a bunch of unschooled yet masterfully trained *apprentices* who’d become *like Jesus* and were now *doing what Jesus had done*. But the most notable and unmistakably recognizable thing about them was that they’d *been with Jesus*.

John’s version of event also launches with Jesus inviting apprentices to *be with him*. In John 1, we see John the Baptist encouraging *his* longtime disciples to now follow *Jesus* instead.

When the two disciples [of John the Baptist] heard him say this, they followed *Jesus*. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “*What do you want?*” They said, “*Rabbi*” (which means “*Teacher*”), “*where are you staying?*” “*Come,*” he replied, “*and you will see.*” So, they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him. (John 1:37-39)

The word *stay* here is the Greek word, *menó*. (Not *m-e-n-n-o*, as in *Menno*-nite, but *m-e-n-ó*) In Greek, *menó* means to *abide*, to remain in constant contact, literally to make your home in. More than just popping by for afternoon tea, to *menó* is to take up permanent residence in. Jesus was inviting these apprentices to move in with him—to make his presence their home. Before teaching them a single word, showing them how to pray, heal the sick or work miracles, Jesus invites them to become permanent residents of his presence—to *be with him*; saying,

Abide (*menó*) in me, as I also abide (*menó*) in you. (John 15:4)

This is the invitation of Jesus to all would-be apprentices—to *be with him*; to *abide* in him; to remain in constant contact and become permanent residents of his abiding presence.

If you were to reflect on your life these days, *where do you abide*? I’m not asking where you get your mail; I mean, what is your emotional home-base? Where do you automatically go internally when you wake up. Where does your mind tend to dwell throughout the day—what’s the resting position your heart most naturally returns to again and again in life’s unscheduled, unprompted, in-between moments—stuck in traffic, in line at the grocery store, or as your head hits the pillow? Is it worry—anxiously stressing about the future? Living in fear, shame and regret? Is your first and most abiding thought about how to get ahead in life? Do you feel most at home in the political arena—drawn into endless global conflict, crisis, and culture wars. Or, like many, have we made our home in the theatre of the mind—the world of fantasy, romance and adventure; more at home in the *virtual* than *reality*. Or maybe, like so many, home is always *away from home*—on the go, busy rushing from one thing to the next, never able to fully stop.

I think for many, if we're honest, where we truly and most consistently *menó*, is on our *devices*—constant scrolling and streaming. Our devices mediate most of our interactions—they're our compass, camera, calendar, and clock. They wake us up every morning, live in our pockets or in our hands all day, and their dim-blue glow puts us to sleep at night. They're how we track our health, our steps, our calories, purchases, and to-do lists; how we get our news, our email, order take-out, play games, watch TV, listen to music—our map when we travel, our flashlight in an emergency, and how we keep up with the latest information, pulling us in with constant updates and notifications. I'm told they can even make *phone calls*! Our devices are brilliantly designed to keep us constantly *connected*, always swiping and scrolling—*abiding*.

Friends, Jesus is inviting us, just as he did his first disciples, to come and stay with him, abide in *him*, to move in and make *him* our home-base. For a moment, consider what it would look like to wake up to Jesus, to cling to him all day long, and fall asleep in the warm glow of his loving presence? To get our information from Jesus, for Jesus to map out our movements, track our steps, mediate our relationships, light our way in a crisis, and keep us constantly connected?

Now, before we go any further, I want to address the elephant in the conversation—the glaringly obvious objection; that, unlike those first-century disciples—*for whom following Jesus literally meant walking behind him, going wherever he went, eating with him, listening to him teach, asking follow-up questions, even sleeping in the same room, and then waking up to do it all over again, day after day*—we aren't first-century Judeans. and we can't simply hop a plane to Tel Aviv, take an Uber to Nazareth, and start *following* Jesus around. I mean, I'm sure, if we had that kind of constant, intimate access to Jesus, our lives and discipleship would be totally transformed too! But we don't live in first-century Israel. So, what are *we*, as modern-day apprentices, supposed to *do*? How can we *be with Jesus*, when Jesus isn't physically *with us*?

This is actually a question Jesus addresses directly. In John's gospel, written near the end of the first century, John is less focused on the historical details of Jesus' life, and more on what the Jesus-story *means* for those of us living in the generations *after* the first century. In the short hours between the Last Supper and Jesus' nighttime arrest, John records Jesus' final instructions to his apprentices, revealing that he's planning to leave them shortly, not just for the cross, but to return to heaven as the enthroned ruler of the world. But although he'll be physically absent from them, his *absence* will make it possible for him to be *present* to them in a brand-new way.

In a little while the people of this world won't be able to see me... I will ask the Father to send you the Holy Spirit who will help you and always *be with you*... I tell you I am going to do what is best for you. This is why I am going away. The Holy Spirit cannot come to help you until I leave. But after I am gone, I will send the Spirit to you. (John 14:19, 16, 16:7)

Despite the instinct that it would be better, or at least *easier*, to *be with Jesus* if we could physically see him, Jesus says it's actually *far better* for us to have the Holy Spirit, so he can be always *with us*—not just nearby, but actually inhabiting our hearts, internally united with his spirit, a kind of *menó-ing* that wasn't possible when he inhabited only a single human body. Think of it like this: when I was a kid, if you needed a book or article for a school project, you had to physically go to the library (*during library hours!*) to access it, hoping someone hadn't already taken it out, since there was only one copy. But now, everything ever written exists online, accessible *anywhere*, at *any time*. Similarly, as cool as it would've been to talk to Jesus face-to-face, by taking on human form, Jesus was subject to human limitations—he had to sleep, he could only be in one place at one time, he could only take on a limited number of apprentices. But through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus can be with all of us, infinitely more intimate—wherever, whenever, with no limitations. Far from having been short-changed by our place in history, we have the *advantage*, a *greater* opportunity to *be with Jesus*.

The good news for any modern-day would-be apprentice of Jesus is that, through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is *with us*. And that's *really* good news! But it's only the *half* of the story, when it comes to what it means to "*Be with Jesus*." The abiding presence of the Holy Spirit is how *Jesus* is with *us*; but what does it look like for *us* to be with *Jesus*?

Well, thankfully, Jesus helps answer this question too, mostly by *demonstrating* it. See, while Jesus came to show what *God* is like, he also came to reveal how to be truly *human*. And as a *human*, Jesus modelled a life of constant abiding in God's presence, consistently living out of a deep and daily nurtured connection to the Father. Luke records that, "***Jesus would often go to some place where he could be alone and pray.***" (Lk 5:16) Jesus regularly set aside time to be with God in prayer. In fact, Luke reveals that, on that final night, to be in prayer, "***He went, as was His habit, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed Him.***" (Lk 22:39) Jesus gave his apprentices unprecedented access to his most sacred moments, so they could learn from him the spiritual habits that fueled and sustained him. And as modern-day apprentices, we too need to follow Jesus' habits. Because, if the Holy Spirit is how *Jesus* is present to *us*, *spiritual habits* are how we make *ourselves* present to *him*—how we *abide* in his abiding presence.

Now, I get that the word *habit* may feel off-putting to some. Not only does it make *being with Jesus* seem like a dull routine; the word has a negative connotation—a *habit* is something you *kick*. Actually, our word *habit* comes from the proto-Indo-European word, *ghabh*, meaning *to hold out your hand* to both *give* and *receive*. This is *ghabh*. In time, it began to refer to one's mental state of being—how you hold *yourself* in the world; how you *live*. We see it in words like *habitat* and *inhabit*. In that sense, spiritual *habits* help us *inhabit* God's presence—to hold our lives before God in a giving and receiving posture. In this way, our *habits* form our *home-base*.

Now, to be clear, spiritual habits and practices, in and of themselves, have no intrinsic value. They can't transform your character or form you into a person of Jesus-shaped love. That's not how they work. Practices aren't about trying really hard to be like Jesus until you get it right; no amount of practice can produce that kind of inner transformation. Practices, in that sense, can't make us *perfect*; but practices can make us *present*. That's the key: spiritual *habits* help us *inhabit* God's space, to abide in and be present to *Jesus*. And just as Jesus cultivated spiritual habits, he invites us as his apprentices to join him in those habits, saying for example,

...when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. (Matthew 6:6)

Prayer is simply the practice of being present to the God who is present to us in the secret place of our hearts. It doesn't have to be complicated; in fact, it's better if it *isn't*. In a televised interview, Mother Teresa was asked, "*When you pray, what do you say to God?*" She replied, "*I don't say anything, I listen*" The interviewer curiously fired back, "*Well okay... when God speaks to you, then, what does he say?*" to which she replied, "*He doesn't say anything. He listens.*" Prayer isn't about *what you say*, it's about *who you're with*. Too often, even a regular quiet time can easily become little more than a time to read the Bible, a devotional, or recite a list of prayer requests, which isn't *bad*, it's just *different* than simply enjoying being with Jesus. In his book, *Practicing The Way*, John Mark Comer tells the story of a priest and an elderly peasant who would sit alone for long hours in the quiet of the church. One day, the priest asked the peasant what he was doing. The old man replied, "*I look at Him, He looks at me, and we are happy.*" Friends, this is the height of prayer—when *talking to* God progresses to *listening to* God, and ultimately to simply *being with* God. That's the heart of apprenticeship to Jesus.

In my life, I have a few habits and practices that help me be more present to Jesus. In the morning, before I touch my phone or start to make the kids lunches, I find a quiet space to be alone with Jesus. I often read a psalm or two, but then I spend 10 minutes quietly resting in his presence—no agenda, goal, or list of requests, no frantic rehearsing of my worries and fears—just quietly sharing space together. I often adopt the *ghabh* posture, holding my life before God, open to give and receive anything Jesus wants. As I brush my teeth, I think prayerfully through The Lord’s Prayer. And since my electric toothbrush won’t buzz until I’m finished, I have plenty of time to invite the Spirit to show me how each line might apply to my life today. I’m much worse at having consistent habits at the end of the day, but recently I’m trying something I’ve never done before: *setting a bedtime alarm*. As I ready myself for sleep, I reflect on the day, thanking God for the gifts of the day, confessing the ways I missed the mark, and then I rest all my cares in God’s care for me, releasing them as I drift off to sleep. Throughout the day, I try to use the in-between moments—my drive to and from work, or in between meetings, or while prepping dinner—to intentionally foster awareness of Christ’s presence with me.

John Mark Comer calls this the art of always being in two places at once: at the breakfast table and *with Jesus*; stuck in traffic and *with Jesus*, in a meeting and *with Jesus*; running errands *and with Jesus*; responding to emails and *with Jesus*. Brother Lawrence (a seventeenth-century cook and dishwasher) called it, *Practicing The Presence of God*, famously writing,

“The time of busyness does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees before the Blessed Sacrament.”

Whether in worship and communion or in the weeds and chaos of another dinner rush, he’d learned the art of being in two places at once—scrubbing pots and pans and *being with*

Jesus. Pulled by life's demands and *spending time with Jesus*. This is the fruit of a lifetime spent practicing of the presence of God—inhabiting a space formed by daily spiritual habits.

The question for each of us today is, how are we doing at practicing the presence of God? How are the daily rhythms and routines of my life making me *more* or *less* present to Jesus? What can we do to intentionally interrupt the flow of life, little reminders to be in two places at once—wherever you are, whatever you're doing, *and with Jesus*. See, apprenticing to Jesus isn't primarily about adding a bunch of religious demands to your already busy to-do list. I mean, it *may* involve *some* new rhythms—like a daily quiet time (just remember, the goal isn't to pray and read your Bible more; it's to *be with Jesus*). Frankly, it's more than likely going to involve *eliminating* things from my schedule—habits you need to kick (like too much screen-time, too much overtime, too many activities and social commitments), not because they're bad but because they're making us less present to ourselves, others, and ultimately to Jesus. But generally, apprenticing to Jesus is about *being with Jesus* in the midst of whatever else we're doing. Living our lives *with Jesus*. Learning, through a combination of the power of Spiritual Habits and the presence of the Holy Spirit, to abide in him, as he abides in us.

And the reward? Well, the reward for embracing apprenticeship to Jesus, is beyond anything you can imagine. It's better than heaven when you die; better than the best this world has to offer. It's not wealth, power, or recognition. Because, as John Mark Comer says so well, "The reward for being with Jesus is... *Jesus*."

As the band comes to lead us in a song of response, instead of *me* praying, I want to invite *you* into a simple act of prayer. You won't have to say a word—it's just a simple, prayerful posture. The proto-Indo-Europeans called it, *ghabh*—a habit, a state of being, hands held out in prayer before Jesus, to give the gift of our presence, and receive the gift of his. Let's pray.