



To follow or not to follow Jesus

*“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me.”*

- Jesus, Matthew 16:24

Most of us remember few if any lines from the Shakespearean plays we studied in English Lit. If there is a line we can quote, however, it’s probably where Hamlet asked, *“To be or not to be, that is the question.”*

Borrowing this line provides an appropriate introduction for what follows. Hamlet was struggling with the question of whether it was better to be alive or dead. Likewise, the decision to follow Jesus boils down to whether we want to experience the pleasures of a worldly life now or surrender to Christ and die to self to receive eternal life.

Jesus did not short-change what is involved in following him. Luke records Jesus’s example of a builder’s need to “count the cost” before starting a construction project (Lukw 14). Neither did he mince words about the hardship we will experience in being his disciple. Allegiance to Jesus over family, putting aside distractions such as property and possessions, and anything else that hinders devotion to him are non-negotiable requirements. He never manipulated or pressured anyone, but neither did Jesus have a hidden agenda.

“Six Weeks” is Timothy Network’s short-course for introducing people to the BIG PICTURE story of the Bible and Jesus. You’ll be looking at how the Bible identifies Jesus (Who he is), how he interacted with sinners, and what it means it means to follow him. It’s a phase of investigation, one that will give you a taste of the discipling process we follow. Following “Six Weeks,” you’ll decide whether to continue to next phase of participation with us – a commitment of about 18 months. We hope these introductory studies and conversations have stirred your desire to know more and that you’ll join us in the journey of following Jesus.

Mike Stroud
The Timothy Network



with The Timothy Network

Note: Scroll down this page to copy / print each week's study and conversation guide.

Week One

Introduction to The Timothy Network

Go to timothynetwork.org)

- Review Calling, Teaching, and Sending goals (Click on the three buttons appearing on the homepage.)
- Homepage: Click the "About" button and review basic points of introduction.
- Also click "Credo" and "Multiplication" buttons at the bottom of this page and give an overview
- Recommend that participants visit and review the website prior to Week 2
- Questions and Discussion
- Make sure everyone has access to the next five discussion guides.

Week Two

Unlocking An Ancient Mystery (The Two Trees in Eden)

- Review: Any questions after last week's discussion and looking over www.timothynetwork.org
- Review and discuss this week's study guide.

Week Three

What Really Counts

- Review and discuss the study guide

Week Four

Who is Jesus?

- Review and discuss the study guide

Week Five

Jesus and Three Sinners

- Review and discuss the study guide

Week Six

What it Means to be a Disciple of Jesus

- Review and discuss the study guide
- This ends the Six Weeks introductory phase.
- Thanks for joining us for these studies and conversations. We hope you'll continue to the next stage, **Participation** in the Journey of Following Jesus.

Week 2

Unlocking an Ancient Mystery; The two trees in Eden

Tree of Life

God's Gift > His Life in Us; Intimate Relationship with God;
Peace; Righteousness Consciousness; No Condemnation

Adam and Eve were offered the Tree of Life. Understanding this tree determines how **LIFE** is defined in the larger context of Scripture! It has nothing to do with our bodies breathing and being alive.

IN SCRIPTURE, "HAVING CHRIST" MEANS HAVING LIFE. He is "the way, the truth, the life." (John 14:6) The apostle John wrote, "He who has the Son has life." (1 John 5:12) Sadly, Adam and Eve lost relational union with God because of their disobedience.

God's warning to Adam is confusing if we don't understand the way God defines being "alive." God warned Adam and Eve of death if they ate the forbidden fruit. Their bodies didn't immediately fall dead upon disobeying God, however. Genesis says Adam lived over 900 years! Instead, something far worse immediately occurred when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. To their horror, they felt separated from God. This is evidenced by their sudden realization of being naked. Nakedness had been irrelevant before their disobedience.

The realization of their nakedness was more than physical. Disobedience brought shame; they experienced the hard-felt reality and pain of separation from God. They were no longer "clothed" in union with God. Fear set in and they hid. They no longer felt His presence. As the Apostle Paul would later describe it, they were now "spiritually dead." (Ephesians 3:1)

The picture of God walking in Eden in the cool of the day hints of regular fellowship that God and Adam and Eve had enjoyed God's regular prior to their disobedience (Genesis 3:8). God's call to them, "Where are you?" is laden with sadness. Sin brought separation from God to their minds, and it still does to all mankind. Paul wrote about this in his letter to the church at Colossae saying, "You were once alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your behavior." (Colossians 1:21)

Sin led to Adam and Eve to be driven from God's presence. They were cast out of the Garden and mighty angels guarded against their access to the tree of life. This separation is later symbolized with angels being embroidered into the physical curtain that separated man from the Holy of Holies in the temple. The banishment continued until the death of Jesus when the thick temple curtain was torn from top to bottom.

Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

Law; Self-Consciousness; Self-Determination; Self-Righteousness;
No Relationship with God; Walking by Sight; Bondage; Condemnation; Death

GOD warned Adam and Eve against eating of this tree. It was the only thing He required them NOT to do, but it wasn't because knowledge is a bad thing. It wasn't that God wanted to keep a cosmic secret from them.

God had already told Adam and Eve what was right and wrong. Satan deceived them into believing there was more. His temptation offered a substitute for God. This tree's lure was the promise of fulfillment but in the creation rather than the Creator. It offered independence from God, and it embodied spiritual death.

Satan's goal was to rupture man's relationship with God, to create disunion and to prevent man from finding completion in God Almighty. It made self-determination "god."

Satan didn't offer Adam and Eve anything they didn't already have. They were created in the image of God. Nevertheless, the devil tempted them with being "like God," offering them an identity separate from God. Now they would have to "earn" their own "goodness;" the gift was stolen.

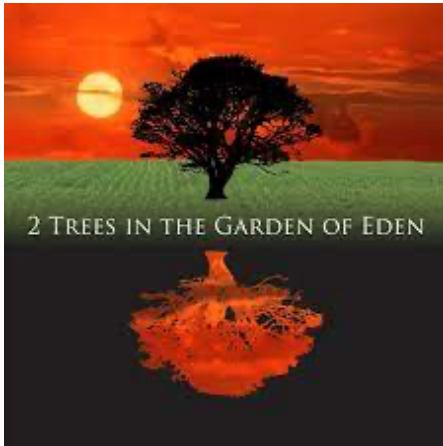
When Eve and Adam ate the forbidden fruit they ripped their identity in who they were from God's hands. This was the birth of self-definition and led to man's insatiable attempt at righteousness without God, i.e self-righteousness! When self is the measure of our righteousness, we cannot know the righteousness provided by Christ. This tree offered a replacement for God!

Living by the unseen requires faith, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil had nothing to do with faith. It was about seeing with the eyes. Satan made it appear the finite creation could fulfill Eve and Adam more so than could God. In an instant, Satan replaced God with self.

The exchange brought shame and fear, God consciousness for self-consciousness. They lost God as the measure of their worth. They exchanged life in God for the impossible task of going it alone. Mankind was left with a gaping chasm of the heart - one that only God can fill!

FAST FORWARD TO MT. SINAI. The Law was given by God through Moses. It reflects His holy nature. It was never meant to save us but intended as a tutor to lead mankind to God's grace. In this sense, the law is a representation of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It reflects walking by sight. Keeping the law is about man's ability. Paul called it "the law of sin and death." (Romans 8:2) Without Christ, we live under it's curse (Galatians 3:1-22) The law condemns and shows our need for a Savior. It reveals our sin; law keeping can't make us righteous, only guilty. (Galatians 3:11). We die to the law through union with Jesus. (Romans 6 and 7)

Week 2



Reading adapted from "God is a Gift" by Doug Reed

For Discussion

- 1) What was involved in Satan's life to Adam and Eve? What did the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil seem to offer?
- 2) What was Satan's goal in Eden?
- 3) How does Doug Reed define "Life" as God planned for man to have it?
- 4) What did it mean to be "alive" in the context of the "Tree of Life"?
- 5) Given that Adam and Eve didn't drop dead the minute they ate the forbidden fruit, what did God mean in telling that Adam and Eve they would "die" if they partook of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?
- 6) Why did Adam and Eve hide after eating the forbidden fruit? Is hiding still an issue that affects us?
- 7) Adam and Eve were banished from Eden after disobeying God. Two mighty angels were then sent to guard the way to the Tree of Life. How is this symbolic of what we see throughout the Old Testament? How did it change with Jesus' Death?
- 8) The author believes Adam and Eve lost their identity in God when they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. What does he mean?
- 9) How might we say the forbidden tree was the opposite of "walking by faith"?
- 10) What did Adam and Eve exchange when they ate from the forbidden tree?

Week Three



Have you ever wondered what God really expects of us? What matters? What counts the most? Many of us ask these questions. Good news! Wonder no more; the Bible gives the answer.

Old Testament:

As part of his last instructions to the people of Israel, Moses gave what is known as the “Shema.” It is a Hebrew word that means “listen,” or “hear and let it sink in.” The term is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (quoted at the top left). They repeated the “Shema prayer” morning and evening.

Loving God with all our heart, soul, and might means to love Him with our entire being. It means loving God unconditionally and without exception.

In Hebrew hearing and doing mean the same thing. Also, love in this context isn’t simply the warm, fuzzy, emotional energy we feel when we like someone. It’s love in action - one evidenced by faithfulness, loyalty, and obedience.

Obedience to the Law of Moses was never intended as a legalistic exercise that would please God. Rather, obedience is about listening and loving. Loving God will help us hear and obey His teachings.

God’s concern for the way we interact with one another is also distinctly emphasized under the Old Covenant. Leviticus 19:9-8 sums it up; the way we treat others matters to God. Caring for the welfare of the poor, respecting the ownership of other people’s property (not stealing from them), the fair treatment of employees, treatment of handicapped persons, justice, the avoidance of slander, hate, and vengeance matter to God. The passage peaks with God’s command to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” This is what genuine love, i.e. love in action, means and looks like.

The emphasis on loving God and loving others is carried over into the New Testament.

New Testament:

Several years ago I had a woman question me saying, “Don’t you know the God of the Old Testament was a God of ‘wrathful vengeance?!’” She thought I was down-playing the importance of obedience by emphasizing God’s love and grace. She assumed I had read past the frightening incidents of God’s wrath on display in various Old Testament stories. In her thinking, a different God was pictured in the Old Testament. Sadly, she’s

not alone. Some see God in the Old Testament as being similar to the angry, frightening, shouting character known as the “Wizard” in “The Wizard of Oz.” I once heard a preacher put it this way, “A lot of people seem to think God became a Christian in the New Testament!” Although there is a transition in covenants from one testament to the next, God’s nature has always remained the same! Tom Olbricht helped clarify this in his little book, “He Loves Forever!”

The Old and New Testaments represent a progression in the Biblical narrative. The transition is from Law to Grace, but God is never portrayed as an angry Deity who “softened up” from one covenant to the next. From Genesis through Revelation, His nature is one of forgiveness and love.

The transition from the Old to the New Covenant is part of the seamless narrative of Scripture. The story began with perfect loving union between God and man in Genesis. It was then marred by man’s disobedience that resulted in severance of their relationship. Things degenerated rapidly after that but God’s plan to restore the relationship was already in place. That plan started with Abraham and the establishment of the Jewish through which the “Messiah” (Savior) would be sent to restore man’s broken relationship with God. The Old Testaments prophecies of this Messiah were fulfilled with the coming of Christ. Christ Jesus and his ultimate crucifixion, death, and resurrection ushered in the New Covenant, one of grace. Jesus became the perfect “Passover lamb,” sacrificed in our place. This grace is the heart of the gospel and it is the very definition of God’s love for us.

The ministry of Jesus puts the New Covenant of Grace on full display. Stories recorded in each of the four gospels show Jesus’ compassion and love for all people – even the worst sinners. He continually associated with people that society labeled “sinners.” He was, in fact, characterized as a “friend of sinners.” (Matthew 9:10-17; Mark 2:15-22; Luke 5:29-39). This is good news for all of us. It’s the gospel! He came to cure our ultimate malady, and he did it with love and sacrifice.

Jesus was the personification of God’s love and love is the hallmark of the New Covenant. It is displayed in God’s love for us and His desire that we spread His Kingdom by loving others. A Pharisee (sect of religious leaders in the New Testament) once asked Jesus, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and with all your mind. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:36-37) In giving this answer, Jesus repeated what Moses taught in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18. He then added, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:40)

“With that statement, Jesus neatly sums up the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments relate to our (vertical) relationship with God. The second six commandments relate to our (horizontal) relationship with others.” *Harvest.org*

And so we have it, loving God and loving others summarizes what God’s Word has to say about the main thing.

Week Three Discussion Guide

- 1) The Bible is a big thick book with a lot of instructions. Have you ever gotten bogged down in the details or left confused about what the most important thing is? Explain.
- 2) How is it possible that “The Ten Commandments,” and the Bible as a whole, really involve only two things? Do you agree? Discuss.
- 3) Why might anyone see God as having different personalities in the Old and New Testaments? Have you ever felt that He did?
- 4) Why would the apostle John say that LOVE is the identifying characteristic of Christians? (John 13:35)
- 5) Does it surprise you that the Bible says we can't love God if we don't love people? Why would this be the case?
- 6) What other thoughts and questions do you have about this subject?



Week 4

"Who is Jesus"

> Imagine <

You've heard of a man who heals the sick, blind, deaf and mute. People have seen him cast out demons. Reliable reports are even circulating that he's raised dead people back to life!

This man, Jesus, came on the scene suddenly and out of nowhere. Word has it that he used to be a construction worker in the little village of Nazareth in northern Israel. Besides healing powers, Jesus is creating a real stir with his teaching, too. Friends say his words are unlike anything they've ever heard from other teachers. *"He speaks as one having authority,"* is their claim.

Thousands are traveling long distances to set eyes on this man and to hear him teach. In the hope of being healed, sickly women have been seen wiggling their way through crowds just to touch his garments. Throngs follow him from place to place. One story has it that he fed a crowd of thousands using only a little boy's sack lunch. You've heard that he repeated that miracle at least twice.

Although multitudes are drawn to him, the religious establishment seems oddly dismissive of Jesus. They categorize him as a fraud - and worse! Accusations are being made that he's in league with the devil! Who, after all, could really drive out a demon. It must be a trick of Satan!

The religious experts are especially hot under the collar because Jesus claims authority to forgive sins. "Blasphemer," they call him.

Topping off their disdain, Jesus' critics mock him over the company he keeps. He's regularly seen with cheats, crooks, drunks, and loose women. *"A true prophet would know better,"* they derisively say. *"A friend of sinners"* they sneer. Jesus apparently put the religious scholars in their place, however, telling them, *"It is the sick who need a doctor, not people who think they're well and healthy. I've come to call sinners to repentance, not those who have no need of repenting."*

It all sounds like a fairytale, but when you learn that Jesus will be speaking in your home town you make plans to be present. The day arrives, and you hurry to the synagogue for a seat. Sure enough, the place is packed. You start looking for him. Oddly, there's no sign anyone of the stature and appearance you'd expect based on all you've heard.

Just when you're wondering if Jesus will show up, someone up front stands and begins speaking. It's apparently him, but you're caught off guard. There's nothing at all impressive in his appearance. He's very plain looking, in fact. That impression quickly changes as he begins speaking. You're soon mesmerized. This man is indeed no ordinary teacher!

Jesus spoke for a little more than two hours. You and every other person present hung on every word. Your mind is reeling from the sermon. He spoke with such humble confidence and clarity. His words pierced your heart and soul like a hot knife. You felt convicted of the sin in your life but also experienced a burden lifting touch of grace, mercy, and love in every word he spoke. It was the most unsettling yet peaceful experience imaginable. Everything he said rang with such "truth."

Walking away you immediately begin replaying every word from his sermon, turning each phrase again and again in your mind. It all stirred like fire in your bones, especially several metaphors he used:

"I am the living water..."

"I am the light of the world....

"I am the gate for the sheep...

"I am the good shepherd...

"I am the true vine...

"I am the resurrection and the life...

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father but through me."

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."

The part about people eating his flesh and drinking his blood caused a real stir! The crowd started arguing and asking questions. Many got up and left. After all, the Law given by Moses strictly forbade the Jewish people from eating or drink the blood of animals. This fellow, however, had the audacity to tell the crowd they'd have to eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have any part of him! It sounded offensive - just a little too much! Yes, that teaching separated the "fans" from his most devoted followers. Many who had followed Jesus apparently left him after this.

You were close enough to see the sadness on Jesus' face as people started pulling away, scoffing at this "hard teaching." You heard him ask his closest followers, *"Will you leave, too?"* One, a man named Peter, didn't miss a beat in answering Jesus. *"Where would we go, Lord? You alone have the words of life."* Hearing Peter say that really helped you put things in perspective.

What do you say?

We're given the choice of dismissing Jesus or accepting him as the Son of God. A careful hearing of his words makes one thing apparent: there's no room for straddling the fence with this man.

Scholars, writers, and preachers are often quoted in regard to deciding about Jesus. One popular argument has become known as the "tri-lemma."

Scots preacher "Rabbi" John Duncan (1796–1870) put it this way, *"Christ either deceived mankind by conscious fraud, or He was Himself deluded and self-deceived, or He was Divine. There is no getting out of this tri-lemma. It is inexorable."*
Source: Wikipedia

Most who are familiar with this position probably remember it being phrased by C.S. Lewis in Mere Christianity. Lewis wrote,

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. ... Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.

C. S. Lewis was an Oxford medieval Literature scholar, popular writer, Christian apologist, and former atheist. He used the argument outlined below in a series of BBC radio talks later published as the book *Mere Christianity*. Source: Wikipedia

Revelation, the final book of the Bible, comes to a close with Jesus making a last bold claim about himself. He said, "*I am the alpha and the omega, the First and the Last, the beginning and the End.*"

Jesus said in effect, "I'm everything there is. I'm it, from A - Z. I was there at the creation, I shed my blood for the salvation of mankind, and I've been given the authority to judge the world. I'm the way - period."

The first Adam chose to reject the rule of God and forfeited his position with the Father. The second Adam, Jesus the Christ - offers restoration of man's relationship with God. Through the sacrifice of God's only son Jesus, Satan's head was crushed (as promised by God in Genesis) and death was defeated. All, then, who place their trust in Christ are freed from the bondage of sin and are given the privilege of becoming children of God. The choice is ours.

Read John 1:1-18

- **Main Thought:** The apostle John was Jesus's closest friend. John, the apostle, is singled out five times in this book as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Jesus obviously loved all his disciples, and all people for that matter, but he and John seemed to have had a particularly close relationship.
- John's gospel is unique among the four. It differs in several ways from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Rather than start with the story of the virgin birth, Mary and Joseph, angels, shepherds, the nativity scene, Herod's attempt to kill the newborn Savior, etc, John jumps right into the deepest water by revealing Jesus, The Word, as God incarnate – the One 'through Whom all things were created'!
- Giving this passage its due attention requires slowing down to take it all in. It's "grandiose" by any stretch of the imagination!
- Those raised in the Christian faith often take a lot for granted. We often skim through scripture, failing to give full attention to the really to the "mind blowing" things the Bible tells us. John 1:1-18 is a good example.
- **Pause and ponder:**
 1. John calls Jesus "The Word, the Word who was God, the Word who was God."

- The Word is Jesus. The Word is God. Jesus is God!
2. John says the Word, Jesus, was responsible for creating everything!
 - Astrophysicists have discovered the known universe is at least 14 billion light years across with not just our own, but millions of other galaxies and a **gazillion billion** stars and planets. IT'S BIG. We can't just read this passage and move on. It has to be taken in.
 - STOP! Do you believe that the Universe was spoken into existence by the Word? Out of nothing?
- Let it soak in. The apostle John is telling us that Jesus is God, Master, and Creator of all that is!!!
- AND THAT JUST FOR A START.....! The passage continues.
1. In him (Jesus) was light; he bright light to men.
 2. The power of darkness cannot overcome His light!
- ++++ Inserted in the middle of all this we're introduced to John the Baptist (not John the Apostle who authored this account)
- John the Baptist came to "give witness" to who Jesus was. John was the last prophet of the Old Covenant. His coming ministry was foretold by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3) 700 years before John and Jesus came.
3. He (Jesus) came to the world He created but most in the world didn't recognize Him. We know the rest of the story; he would be rejected and crucified.
 4. **BUT.... GOSPEL...** Those who did believe in His Name and receive Him were given the right to become the children of God. These children are "Born of God, " not man!
 5. John says the Word became flesh, referring to Jesus!
 6. John testifies that he (and other believers) saw his glory – the glory of the One and Only God! **John wrote about this again in I John 1-4)**
 7. Then passage closes with words of John the Baptist (v. 15).
 - This is who the One I told you about!
 - He who comes before me has surpassed me because He was before me (Eternal God)
 8. John (the author and apostle) makes an important qualifying distinction between Moses and Jesus in this opening passage (verse 17). In doing so he was speaking of the Old Covenant being replaced by the New. Law Covenant was through Moses, new covenant of Grace is now brought by Jesus.
 9. NO HUMAN HAS EVER SEEN GOD! BUT GOD, THE ONE AND ONLY WHO IS NOW AT THE FATHER'S SIDE HAS MADE HIM KNOWN.

For Discussion:

- 1) C.S. rightly has rightly said that we either believe Jesus was who he said he was, a fraud, or mentally disturbed. He raises this point to combat the position (which some hold) that argues Jesus was a good man but not God. Lewis says we don't have that choice. What does he mean? What do you make of his argument?
- 2) What do you make of the Apostle John's description of Jesus in John 1:1-14? Had you ever thought of him as the "Creator of all things."
- 3) How is it possible that Jesus be fully God and fully man?
- 4) Read John 6:25-71. This story identifies true believers vs. the marginally interested. What's your reaction to this story?
- 5) If you have doubts about Jesus, what are they?
- 6) If you're already a believer, how would you defend your faith in Jesus at this point in time.
- 7) What other points would you like to discuss relative to this study?



Week 5

Jesus and Three Sinners

The New Testament gives several accounts of Jesus interacting with people that the religious leaders of the day wouldn't be caught hanging out with. It was scandalous to them that he attended parties hosted by social outcasts, that he was often found having meals with them, and that he claimed authority to forgive their sins. They branded him "a friend of tax collectors and sinners." (Luke 7:34) This week's study will cover three stories that highlight God's love for the lost and his mission to save us.

First, the following summary from gotquestions.org helps answer the question about "Why" Jesus was labeled a friend of sinners.

Soon after calling Matthew to follow Him, Jesus ate a meal with "many tax collectors and sinners" in Matthew's house ([Mark 2:15](#)). Matthew had been a tax collector, and these "sinners" were his friends and acquaintances who were now spending time with Jesus. Matthew wanted to introduce people in his social circle to Jesus. The scribes and the Pharisees, who despised tax collectors, complained, but Jesus' actions in spending time with sinners were in perfect accordance with His mission to seek and to save the lost ([Luke 19:10](#)).

In Jesus' day, rabbis and other spiritual leaders enjoyed widespread respect and were held in high esteem in Jewish society. Almost everyone looked up to the Pharisees. They were strict adherents to the Law, they were the guardians of tradition, and they were the exemplars of piety. In their vaulted position, they avoided those whom they deemed "sinners"—those who did not follow their system of rules. Pharisees and the other religious class of Jesus' day would definitely not have socialized with tax collectors, who were infamous for embezzlement and their cooperation with the hated Romans.

Jesus chose to eat with sinners because they needed to know that repentance and forgiveness were available. As Jesus' ministry grew, so did His popularity among the social outcasts of society. Once Matthew was part of His inner circle, Jesus naturally had more contact with the pariahs of His society. Spending time with the tax collectors and sinners was only natural, since He had "not come to call the righteous, but sinners" ([Mark 2:17](#)). If Jesus was to reach the lost, He must have some contact with them. He went to where the need was because "it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" ([Luke 5:31](#)).

Sitting at Matthew's feast, Jesus broke societal taboos and condemned the Pharisees' legalistic system of attaining righteousness. The fact that Jesus ate with sinners shows that He looked beyond culture to people's hearts. Whereas the Pharisees disregarded people because of their past behavior, Jesus saw their spiritual need.

All through Jesus' ministry, He reached out to those who needed Him. He conversed with a despised Samaritan woman at a well—surprising even His disciples ([John 4:27](#)). He forgives an immoral woman in [Luke 7](#), He helps a Syro-Phoenician woman in [Mark 7](#), He touches a leper in [Luke 5](#), and He enters Zacchaeus's house and dines with him in [Luke 19](#). Again and again, Jesus touched the untouchable and loved the unlovely.

Jesus came to save sinners. Tradition, cultural bans, and the frowns of a few do not matter when a soul's eternal destiny is on the line. "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" ([John 3:17](#)).

Jesus saw individuals, not just their labels. He had compassion and sought to meet the needs around Him. In sharing the word of God, Jesus ate with sinners and spent time with them. Seeing all of this, sinners were no doubt inspired to know Him better. They recognized Jesus as a righteous man, a man of God—the miracles He performed bore witness to that—and they saw His compassion and sincerity.

Jesus didn't let social status or cultural norms dictate His relationships with people. As the Good Shepherd, He sought the lost sheep wherever they had strayed. When Matthew hosted the dinner party, Jesus accepted the invitation. It was a wonderful opportunity to share the good news of the kingdom with those who most needed to hear (see [Matthew 4:23](#)). He was criticized for His actions by the self-righteous legalists of His day, but criticism did not deter Him.

Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus didn't require people to change *before* coming to Him. He sought them out, met them where they were, and extended grace to them in their circumstances. Change would come to those who accepted Christ, but it would be from the inside out. The kindness of God leads sinners to repentance ([Romans 2:4](#)), and Jesus was full of kindness.

Jesus showed us that we shouldn't let cultural norms dictate whom we evangelize. The sick need a physician. Lost sheep need a shepherd. Are we praying to the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into the field ([Luke 10:2](#))? Are we willing to go ourselves?

Read and consider the stories from the New Testament:

- Zacheus, the Tax Collector (Luke 19:1-10)
- The Woman at the Well (John 4:1-42)
- John 8:1-11

A Contemporary Example

Maybe you've heard of Tony Compolo. Although not as prominent a voice in Christian circles as he was back in the 1980s and '90s, he still speaks and writes. His background is in both preaching and teaching on the university level. All that said, Compolo told the following story in "The Kingdom of Heaven is a Party," a book he authored several years ago. It's become a popular story, one you've possibly heard and one that serves as a "spring board" into this week's topic. Note: You might not agree with all the Tony Compolo writes and teaches, but this story resonates with the way Jesus dealt with the outcasts of his time. Thank God, it also illustrates the way he still loves the sinner, and that includes all of us!

Tony was speaking in Hawaii, and for a resident of the Philadelphia area as he is, that means he wakes up at 3 am ready for breakfast. So, he was out in Honolulu looking for a diner where he could get some bacon and eggs. What he finally found in that closed-up city was a greasy spoon restaurant where he was afraid to touch the menu lest some creepy crawly thing would be lurking inside. The guy behind the counter served him coffee and, when Tony ordered a donut, thinking it would be safe, the guy grabs it with his sticky fingers. Suddenly, the door opens and in walks eight or nine women who are clearly and visibly prostitutes. They are noisy and boisterous.

Since the diner was small, the women sat on stools on both sides of Tony, the preacher/sociology professor. He was increasingly uncomfortable and about to head for the exit, when one of the women made an announcement. "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be thirty-nine." Her friend beside her said, "So, what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?" The first girl said, "Come on! Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I don't want anything from you." She continued in that vein for a bit. "I don't want anything. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?" That's when Tony made a decision.

When the women left, he said to the guy behind the counter, "Do they come in here every night?" "Oh yeah," he said. "The one who was sitting next to me? Does she come in every night?" "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in every night. Why d'ya wanna know?" Tony said, "Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?" "That's great!" the guy said. "I like it!" He called his wife in from the back, and they began making plans. They would make the cake, and Tony would decorate the place.

At 2:30 the following morning, Tony arrived with crepe-paper decorations and a homemade sign that read, "Happy birthday, Agnes!" Tony writes, "The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street because by 3:15, every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes....and me!" Right on the dot, Agnes comes in with her friend. Everyone called out, "Happy birthday!"

"Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted....so stunned....so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, we all sang 'Happy Birthday' to her." When they brought out the cake, Agnes lost it. She began crying.

Harry, the counter guy, said, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles!" After a bit, he finally blew them out himself. Then he handed her the knife and said, "Cut the cake, Agnes. We all want some cake." Agnes stared at that cake, then she said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I....I mean is it O.K. if I kind of....what I want to ask you is...is it O.K. if I keep the cake a little while? If we don't eat it right away?" She said, "I want to take the cake home. I just live down the street a couple of doors. I'll be right back, honest!"

She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and walked out, carrying it, Tony says, like it was the Holy Grail. When the door closed behind her, there was silence in the diner. Not knowing what else to do, Tony calls out, "What do you say we pray?" It just felt like the thing to do, he writes. So, he prayed for Agnes. He asked God to save her. He prayed that her life would be changed and God would be good to her.

When he finished, Harry leaned over the counter and said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher! What kind of church do you belong to?" Tony says, "In one of those moments when just the right words

came, I answered, 'I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning!' Harry was quiet for a long moment, then he said almost with a sneer, "There is no church like that! But if there was, I'd join it in a heartbeat!" "Wouldn't we all?" Tony writes.

For Discussion:

1. What do we learn about the effects of sin in the stories from Luke and John?
2. What does each story tell us about God?
3. What do we learn about man?
4. What surprising things did you learn in reading these accounts?
5. Tony Compolo's story gives a contemporary example of the way Jesus might interact with a person a lot of Christians would avoid. Her sin "sticks out" more than other overt sins or hidden sins of the heart (greed, gossip, lust, gluttony, lying, etc). Would you have interacted with Gladys? How does the story help us see God's intent to forgive and rescue us?
6. What are your main "take aways" from this study?

Week 6

What it Means to be a "Disciple" of Jesus

The term "disciple" refers to those who are apprentices, followers, or students of a certain teacher.

In Christianity, a disciple is one who follows Jesus. The daily practice of applying the teachings of Jesus is often referred to as "discipleship."

Because Jesus's first followers later became the twelve "apostles" people sometimes think of "disciple" as a special ranking or designation applying to those men only. It doesn't. All people who undertake the practice of following the teachings of Jesus are his disciples.

In ancient times, there were few higher learning institutions. Instead, those who wanted to learn a skill or a philosophy attached themselves to a journeyman or a teacher and spent significant time with them to learn the trade. For instance, in the trade fields, an apprentice would devote literally years to assisting the master. In the case of those learning a philosophy, the student would follow the teacher for years, traveling wherever they would go, and the teacher would expound as they walked, teaching the intricacies of the faith. The disciples of Jesus did just that. Wherever Jesus went, the disciples would follow, and Jesus would teach them as they moved from place to place.

The twelve disciples, as they were so named in Matthew's gospel - John's gospel simply calls them "the twelve"- were specially chosen from the rest of the disciples to be specifically mentored as Jesus' closest associates. These twelve disciples would later be sent out by Jesus to become the first church planters of the Christian church. *Source: House Church Network Association*

For Discussion:

Read: Luke 9:23-24; Luke 9:57-62; Luke 14:25-33; John 8:31-32; John 13:35; 1 John 2:3-6

- 1) Big picture: What most gives you "pause" after reading and reflecting on these scriptures?
- 2) What did Jesus mean about "counting the cost"?
- 3) Jesus said the world will know us as his disciples "by our love for one another." How then could he teach that we "must hate" father, mother, brother, sister and even our own lives in order to be his disciple?
- 4) Jesus deals with three people in Luke 9:57-62 who wanted to follow him. Discuss his responses to all three. What do you learn?
- 5) What is your biggest concern about taking on the role of following Jesus?
- 6) Given the straightforward demands given by Jesus in these passages, how do you feel about "succeeding" as his disciple? Read Galatians 2:20; Romans 8:1-3; 1 John 1:8-10. How do these passages provide confidence for the journey of being a disciple of Jesus? Remember, the power is in Christ and Christ is in those who are his "born again" children.