

I was in high school when the What Would Jesus Do? phenomenon swept across the nation. A youth leader in Michigan took the phrase, which is actually pretty old, and plastered it on bracelets to distribute to her youth. The idea was pretty simple: Look at how Jesus behaved and then act like that. In every situation, just ask yourself, "If Jesus were here right now, what would *he* do?" Then do that.

There was about a 4-month space in the WWJD craze where it was really beautiful. Teens (and some adults) all over the country had these simple bracelets on and were really thinking hard about what living like Jesus *looked* like. And sure, it got out of control. There were WWJD t-shirts, WWJD teddy bears and WWJD bibles (seriously: Bibles?). Basically anything that could have a logo slapped on it became a WWJD version of that thing.

But there was a dark side to the WWJD craze beyond the over-marketing of it. WWJD really served to highlight how much *not* like Jesus we all were. Asking constantly, WWJD? underscored that Jesus behaved pretty differently from me - and I was a pretty tame, church-going high school kid. It turns out there was a pretty big gap between how Jesus acted and how I acted. Not in the silly ways (I didn't have a beard in high school, I don't like fish, I am not really a sandals guy, all I'm going to do with a hammer is hurt myself). And not in the big ways (I'm not robbing banks or anything like that). No, it was in the little things - like how my first impulse when someone was cruel to me was to be cruel back. How easily I could cover my insecurities and shortcomings with white lies. The small, easy sins that seemed almost as natural to me as breathing.

It wasn't that I wasn't sure what Jesus would really do. It was that I knew that, deep down, I wasn't like Jesus. So I could try, I could act like Jesus, but in some ways it felt like a fish trying to ride a bicycle. And every time I fell down, I wondered what the point was of getting back on. Why try to be something I'm not? Because it's actually pretty exhausting, to fake it and hope I'll eventually make it.

Friends, this is the question I want to ask today: What does it mean to be a disciple? If it's just "try really hard to act like Jesus", that's not very good news because sooner or later, we'll all wear out and fail. Fortunately, that's not what discipleship is. Discipleship gets at that inner gap between us and God. The good news is that gap is an illusion. We're not, at our core, essentially different from Jesus. In fact we are created in his image. Discipleship is about learning to see through the lie that we are different, that lie we call sin. We learn to see by resting in the light of God's love, which shows us the truth about ourselves. We're going to explore that truth today.

### **Message**

We always use November as a way to remember who we are as a church - what does it mean to say that God has called us to be this particular body called Catalyst in this particular place in North-east Dallas. This year, we're sketching out some of the big ideas that are going to be guiding us over the next few years. We began with the idea of friendship, that we want Catalyst to be a place where it's easy to make friends, because friendship is the heart of Jesus' good news. When we make friends with people, they see how God makes friends with them.

Last week, we explored what it looks to be a truly diverse church. We saw that diversity isn't a political agenda or a cultural trend, but God's desire for the church from the beginning. We asked what it looks like for Catalyst to embody God's diverse church here on Earth as it is in heaven.

Today, we're asking about our faith journey. As we become a diverse collection of friends, where are we going? Or rather, where is God taking us? What kind of people are we becoming?

The shorthand for this in churches is "Discipleship". Discipleship is that question of "how to we look like Jesus?" It invites us to think of ourselves as part of Jesus' inner circle of twelve disciples.

So what does it mean to follow Jesus? For a long time, the Church has answered that this question is about knowing the right information. We trace this back to the Enlightenment, when we started thinking humans are primarily thinking machines (Descartes is the one who said, "I think therefore I am." Thinking is what makes me human. My ability to reason is how I know I'm a person.).

If thinking is what makes us human, then it stands to reason that following Jesus is about learning more things. So we study the Bible, memorize Scripture, take theology classes, even learn Greek and Hebrew if we can. This is where the idea of Sunday School came from - you hear it in the title. It's SCHOOL. What matters most is *learning more*. What keeps us from looking more like Jesus is a lack of *knowledge*.

You don't have to think about that very hard to see the problems here: following Jesus shouldn't depend on how smart you are. And we all know plenty of pretty smart people, who know a lot about the Bible but aren't actually very spiritual. People who've been in church their whole lives who can quote the Bible and teach you some pretty interesting facts but are nonetheless abusers or cruel or selfish.

Knowledge doesn't automatically make disciples. Paul wrote as much to the church in Corinth. They were having some real nuts-and-bolts discipleship issues, confronting problems Jesus never had in his ministry. They were trying to do *WWJD*, but they weren't sure *WJWD*. They all had their right answers, and into the middle of their arguing, Paul said,

Yes, we know that “we all have knowledge” about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church. Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn't really know very much. But the person who loves God is the one whom God knows. -- 1 Corinthians 8:1-3

Knowledge makes us feel important - the Greek there is "puffs up". But love strengthens us all. The Greek there is "builds up". Knowledge puffs up; love builds up.

The person who has all the answers doesn't really have very much, but the person who loves God is the one God *knows*.

Don't miss this: Paul says it's *better to be known by God* than it is to know about God.

Discipleship is really about *being known by God*.

Becoming like Jesus is about being known by God. Not about moving toward God or making a list of behaviors God finds accepting or learning a bunch of facts *about* God, but being known by God.

Jesus understood this - when he called the twelve to be his disciples, it was something rabbis did all the time. Rabbis chose people to be their students - which is what 'disciple' means. But rather than sit in a classroom, the disciple was expected to follow their rabbi around. To do what their rabbis did. And eventually, over time, they became *like their rabbis*. The goal of discipleship wasn't just learning new information (though that was part of it). It was transformation.

When Jesus invites us to be his disciples, his followers, he's inviting us to become like him, to be transformed.

But doesn't that just take us back to the WWJD problem? It doesn't take very long trying to follow Jesus to realize we're not like him. If knowledge doesn't bridge that gap - remember, knowledge puffs up - then how do we achieve transformation?

Paul says being known by God is what builds up. And Jesus *called us* to follow. God tells us that discipleship begins with being known by God. The barrier to transformation is that we don't let ourselves be known by God. We don't let ourselves be loved by God.

What does that mean, exactly? How do we let ourselves be loved by God?

[Scripture Slide] It's harder than it sounds... we don't want to be seen by God. Turn with me to 1 John 1. In both the gospel and letters, John uses the image of light and darkness to describe our relationship to God. Right here at the beginning of his letter, John offers some framework that sounds pretty confusing for a lot of us raised in the church:

**This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.**

So far, this sounds like what we expect: God is good, sin is bad. God is light, sin is dark. Our goal is to quit sinning and come into God's light.

It's what we expect, but it's also where we fail, because we've all had the experience of coming into God's light, but still sinning. So what's the deal? Are we hopping back and forth between light and dark? Are we just still living in the darkness even though we're good sometimes?

Let's keep reading what John says:

If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.  
-- 1 John 1:5-10

So we should live in the light, which cleanses us from all sin, but if we say we have no sin, we're lying and living in the darkness? What's happening here?

John wants us to separate our identity from our actions. When we sin, we think of ourselves as sinners, as though our core identity is something disgusting and hateful to God.

But that's not the core of who we are. As humans, we're created in God's image - that's the first truth of who we are. Sin is darkness, it's deception. Sin keeps us from seeing the truth of who we are. Sin lies to us about our true nature and about the truth of other people.

This is why Paul tells us that being loved by God is what builds us up. God always loves us. God has always loved us. God will always love us. That is the first truth of how God sees you: a beloved child. Sin convinces us otherwise. Sin convinces us we're ugly, unlovable, rejected. Sin convinces us to hide from God.

But it's all a lie. Mystics refer to this lie as our shadow self. It's a false self we all create out of fear, shame or anger. Our shadows are like a video game avatar - they're a preferred way for us to interact with the world. Our shadow selves feel safer than our real selves. But because our shadows were formed out of darkness, they create darkness. And facing down our shadow selves is *really hard*.

It's scary. Because the shadow is what has kept us safe all these years. But if we can learn to sit in God's light, if we can learn to let ourselves be seen by God, we find we're *loved by God*, we live in the light, and we are transformed.

Not by our actions, but by God's love for us. God shows us who we really are. God shows us who our neighbors really are. God shows us the lies that give rise to our sins. God is the light by which we see the world around us.

When we live in God's love, when we see by God's light, we become the images of God we were created to be. Not by working hard. Not by earning. But by receiving from God

It sounds so simple, but in my years as a pastor, I have seen this is the hardest thing for people to do. I have watched people blow up their whole lives rather than face their own shadows. I've seen people wreak untold devastation on people they love because they can't sit in God's love. I've seen people who

persist in misery and pain because the darkness they know is more comfortable than the light of God's love.

We want to be a church of light. Not a church that adds burdens to people, who gives them spiritual to-do lists or a church that makes it easy to continue to hide in darkness.

As we look toward the future, we're not asking, "How do we help people learn more things about God?" We're not going to stop teaching the Bible, of course. But in all we do, we're going to be asking, How do we help people be loved by God? How do we make it safer for people to face their shadows? How do we help people face the darkness they hide in? And how can we live together in the light of God's love?

We want to be a people of light, a place where we live in the truth of God's love together.

**Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] We come into God's light. The table tells us the truth about ourselves, and shows us who God really is.

**Assignment + Blessing**

Meditation on Psalm 139