



BIBLICAL

foundations for discipleship:
authentic followers of **JESUS**
in today's world

Mark's gospel suggests four ways of fixing our eyes on Jesus - each of which help us see different dimensions of discipleship and respond freshly to his life-giving, revolutionary invitation to 'follow him', writes Peter Morden

Soon after Jesus began his public ministry, he called his first disciples. Matthew 4:18-22 describes it vividly. "Come, follow me" Jesus says, and four fishermen leave everything to go after him and begin a new life fishing 'for people' (4:19). The call is clear, the response immediate and the effect dramatic, for what had just happened in the insignificant outpost of the Roman Empire that was first-century Palestine was to prove a

pivotal moment in world history. These disciples could not have known it at the time, but Jesus would take them and a few other ordinary women and men and do something quite extraordinary. He would teach and train them and then, after his death and resurrection, commission and empower them to go to the 'nations' to make more disciples.¹ The risen Lord is still calling, sending and multiplying disciples today. In fact, he wants all of us to respond freshly to his life-giving, revolutionary invitation to 'follow him'. If we do, the impact is potentially just as transformative now as it was 2000 years ago.

We need to ask the question though, 'What does it mean to follow Jesus faithfully today?' The early disciples, whether it was Peter, Mary Magdalene, or any

of those who first heard his call, followed him quite literally. They journeyed with him along dusty Palestinian roads; they watched him and did the things he did; they sat at his feet and listened to his teaching.

Jesus is not with us physically and we cannot respond to him in precisely the same way. So how are we to follow or, as is sometimes said, 'apprentice' ourselves to him now? Mark 8-9, chapters at the heart of Mark's gospel, help orient us for the life of discipleship in the contemporary world.

**True
discipleship
is missional
discipleship**

Discipleship begins and ends with Jesus

We pick up the narrative with Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah (8:29). This is a pivotal moment in the unfolding gospel story. Jesus is revealed as the one who will come and save his people. Then, in Mark 9 we see him transfigured in brilliant, blazing brightness and hear Father God saying, "This is my Son, whom I love" (9:7). Verse after verse in the gospel calls us to focus on Jesus Christ, God's Son our Saviour. We are drawn into the story but he is always at the centre.

Some studies on discipleship concentrate more on the life we are to lead than the one we are to follow. But this is a mistake, for if we are to follow Jesus closely we are going to need to look to him more than we look to ourselves. How do we do this? Mark 8-9 suggests four ways of 'fixing our eyes' on Jesus, each of which helps us see different dimensions of discipleship.²

'Listen to him'

The voice on the mountain challenges the disciples to 'listen' to Jesus (9:7). The challenge is the same for us, and we hear his voice through the Scriptures which carry 'God breathed' authority.³

There are so many resources to help us 'listen'. The Bible Project is a brilliant way to appreciate the grand narrative of Scripture so we see how the different parts fit together.⁴ Vlogs such as the one by my colleague Helen Paynter help us apply the difficult parts of the Bible – New and Old Testament – to our lives today.⁵ The emphasis on disciplined devotion, which is

making a welcome comeback in western spirituality, directs us to practices which create space to hear Jesus above the many other voices which clamour loudly for our attention.⁶ Through the development of holy habits we 'listen' to Jesus and God does his transforming work in us by Word and Spirit. We cannot be faithful disciples if we do not pay close attention to our Master. Listen to him.

'Take up your cross'

Next there is the challenge of Jesus' words, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34). It is hard to imagine a more jarring statement for a first-century Jewish audience. The words 'whoever' and 'must' need to be carefully noted and absorbed. Jesus is not setting out an optional extra for the especially keen and committed. The road signposted 'discipleship' is also marked the 'way of the cross'. This is true for all of us. There are no exceptions.

What does this way of the cross involve? In its original context – namely a society only too aware of the horrors of crucifixion – to speak of cross-bearing is surely to stress that the road of discipleship is marked by suffering. It should come as no surprise that the first disciples suffered, the early Church suffered, or that persecution is a distressing reality for many brothers and sisters around the world today. We naturally shrink from suffering, but comfortable Western Christians have to be ready.

The words about 'self-denial' and following Jesus (8:34), tied so closely to the call to carry our cross, suggest a further

layer of meaning. We are to deny ourselves and place our lives in the hands of another, namely Jesus himself. The call is to dethrone 'self' and make Jesus 'Lord'. This aspect of cross-bearing discipleship, like that of suffering, is profoundly counter-cultural. We do not warm to self-denial; self-fulfilment sounds much better. As we reflect on this, it is vital to appreciate we are placing our lives in the hands of our loving, liberating Lord who reassures us that through the counter-intuitive process of giving our lives to him we will actually save them. The way of discipleship is the way to 'life in all its fulness', life now and life in the age to come.⁷ But sacrifice comes first. I have been deeply challenged writing these words. My prayer is that as a Baptist movement we would hear the challenge as we engage once more with Jesus' radical call on our lives.

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Follow him into mission

As we engage with Mark 9 we're invited to contemplate Jesus' glory, giving ourselves in worship and wonder alongside the three disciples who saw him transfigured before their eyes. As we spend time with him, whether one-to-one or in the company of others, we get to know him more. Here is a further way of fixing our eyes on Jesus – contemplation and adoration. But we should notice something further. Mark 9 speaks of glory

² Cf Hebrews 12:2

³ 2 Timothy 3:16

⁴ BibleProject.com

⁵ Why Hope? - YouTube (<https://ow.ly/ObWI50SN2vp>)

⁶ Practicing the Way (see resources p38-39)

⁷ John 10:10

on the mountain and glory in the valley. The disciples worship the transfigured Jesus and then he leads them down the mountain to engage in mission to broken people in a broken, hostile world (9:14-29).

Some teaching on Christian discipleship either misses this emphasis on mission or does not give it the prominence it deserves. At various times in my life I have been told that God is not so much interested in my ministry but only in my own 'personal walk' with Jesus: 'it's what God wants to do in you not through you which is important.' But this is a false dichotomy. God is indeed vitally interested in our inner lives and personal relationship with him, but he is also deeply concerned that we participate in his mission. In a self-centred world the call is clear. True discipleship is missional discipleship.

Failure is not final

The call to fully committed, cross-bearing discipleship which is deeply rooted in Jesus and missional to the core is needed now more than ever. But as we continue to look to our Lord we should notice one final thing. The first disciples mess up repeatedly, but Jesus perseveres with them. We read they fail in their attempts to drive out the unclean spirit and exhibit an extraordinary prayerlessness (9:18, 29). They are unable or unwilling to grasp Jesus' crucial teaching about his forthcoming

death and resurrection (9:29-32), even arguing about which of them is the greatest (9:33-37). The God-given insight of Peter's confession of Christ notwithstanding, the story of the disciples from 8:27-9:37 is a story of repeated failure. And this is of a piece with the rest of the gospel. Read on and see how Mark's gospel finishes, assuming with most commentators that 16:8 is the final verse. Even the female followers of Jesus, who in Mark are consistently more faithful than their male counterparts, 'said nothing to anyone [about the resurrection] because they were afraid.' All this would be astonishing if we didn't recognise each of these failings and more in ourselves. Just as they did, we often stumble and fall.

Given the disciples' long litany of failure, the grace with which Jesus deals with them is remarkable. Of course, he speaks to them strongly. The rebuke, 'Get behind me Satan' is for Peter especially but spoken whilst Jesus is looking at the others (8:34). The Master disciplines his disciples. Yet wonderfully, despite multiple blunders of belief and behaviour, his grace for them is renewed daily. This is the gospel we too have believed. Our faith is frail, our Saviour is strong, his grace is sufficient. Consequently, let us fix our eyes on him once again and commit to follow wherever he leads. This is the adventure of discipleship. We hear afresh those extraordinary words of Jesus, '**Come, follow me!**'



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Before becoming Principal, Peter was Minister / Team Leader of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Leeds. Previously to this, he was on the staff of Spurgeon's College for ten years, latterly as Vice Principal and Director of Training. Peter has a passion for missional discipleship and for training, releasing and supporting new generations of church planters, pioneers and pastors.

Peter is the author of a number of books, including *The Message of Discipleship: Following Jesus in Today's World* (London: Inter-Varsity Press [Bible Speaks Today], 2018).

