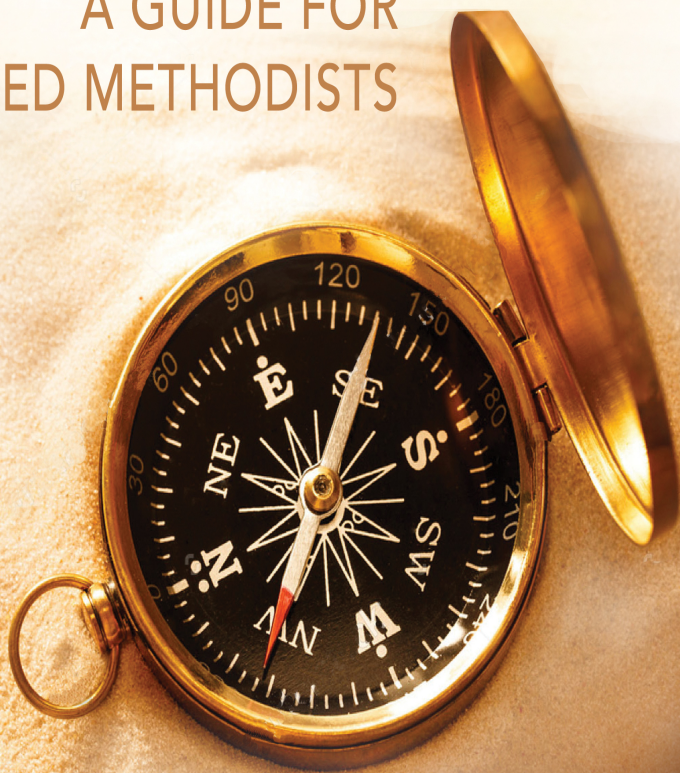


JAMES A. HARNISH WITH JUSTIN LAROSA

A DISCIPLE'S PATH

A GUIDE FOR
UNITED METHODISTS



DAILY WORKBOOK

A Disciple's Path Daily Workbook

Deepening Your Relationship with Christ and the Church

By James A. Harnish, Justin LaRosa

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CHAPTER 1

A Disciple's Path Defined

When was the last time you watched a toddler learning to walk? There's always a lot of stumbling, falling down, getting up, falling again, and then taking off in a burst of energy and running straight into the sofa. There's also a lot of hand holding and support from parents and grandparents along the way. But as children continue to grow, they get better at walking, and they keep walking for the rest of their lives.

There is a lot of walking in the Bible, and it's more than just getting from one place to another. Throughout Scripture — from God walking with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden in Genesis to the risen Christ walking among the churches in the book of Revelation — walking is the basic biblical metaphor for living and growing in relationship with God.

The psalmist said, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"

(Psalm 119:105). When Jesus called his first disciples, they got up, left their past behind, and walked along with him. The writer of the epistles named for John wrote, "Whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked" (1 John 2:6) and "This is love, that we walk according to his commandments. ... You must walk in it" (2 John 1:6). An old gospel hymn says, "When we walk with the Lord in the light of his word, what a glory he sheds on our way!"

Discipleship is all about learning to walk with Christ. We stumble. We fall. We pick ourselves up and go again. We are surrounded by a community of disciples who pick us up, hold our hands, and keep walking with us along the way. But we keep on walking. We keep on growing. We keep moving into a life that is more and more deeply centered in loving God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. We keep on loving others the way we have been loved by God. Spiritual growth is the process by which we grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ, but only if we keep on walking with him.

You have accepted the invitation to follow Jesus and take the next step along the pathway of discipleship. So, how do we actually do it? What does it look like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? The beginning point is exploring what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and how we grow in our relationship with him.

Week 1: Day 1

What Is a Disciple's Path?

Scripture Reading

Read the following:

Luke 10:25-28

Mark 12:28-34

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

John 13:34-35

Today's Message

A definition of discipleship based on the Gospels begins with love — love for God and love for others. *A Disciple's Path* defines a disciple in the following way:

This definition of discipleship combines belief and action that result in a life transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Belief indicates that we are attracted to Jesus and his teachings. It affirms that we believe what the Gospel writers and Christian tradition say about who Jesus is. It means we trust that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has restored our relationship with God and is at work to heal all of creation.

A disciple is an apprentice who is constantly growing in his or her understanding of what Christians believe.

But is belief enough to be considered a "follower of Jesus"? If a person has the "right" beliefs about Christ, is that sufficient? The word *follow* describes something that is done with your feet, not just with your head. Action also is required in order to be a follower of Jesus. What kind of action are we talking about? Based on today's Scripture, this action can be described as loving God and loving others. Being a disciple means we tangibly act on our deepening belief. You can be certain that you are on the path of discipleship as you act out love for God and love for others.

There are two components to following Jesus: a growth in belief and a

growth in action. As the drawing illustrates, a transformed heart emerges as belief and action deepen.

Belief and action do not always grow or change at the same time or rate. For some of us, belief is enough to change action. We believe in God's redeeming love through the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and as a result, we act. Many are drawn toward Christ through action as they serve others in ministries of mercy and justice, even though they are unsure about what they believe about Jesus or the church. For them, belief follows action.

Growth in belief and action marks the path along which we continue to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. Through the combination of belief and action, transformation takes place as we become people whose lives are centering on loving God and loving others.

The discipleship pathway is the way that we grow as followers of Christ. Following Christ is not just subscribing to and claiming a set of beliefs, rituals, or spiritual disciplines. It is a way of life.

Your Reflections

In your own words, how would you define a disciple of Jesus?

What are the beliefs that you would name as essential for a disciple of Jesus?

How have your beliefs been demonstrated by your actions?

How have your beliefs and actions changed over time?

Prayer

Lord, I want to follow you. I trust you to be at work in my life as I enter into the practices by which my life can be centered in loving you and loving others. Do your work of grace in me. Amen.

Week 1: Day 2

Relationship Stages

Scripture Reading

Read the following:

John 1:43-51

Psalm 119:1-5, 57-60, 105

Philippians 3:8-16

Today's Message

The discipleship path starts at birth and ends at death. God's grace is drawing us into relationship every moment of our existence. Our opportunity is to respond to God's invitation and enter into a growing relationship with our Creator. Day 1's reading defined a *disciple* as "a follower of Jesus whose life is centering on loving God and loving others" and suggested that following Jesus includes two essential components: growth in belief and growth in action. The discipleship pathway is the way

that we deepen our relationship with Christ and the church.

Once we are grounded in the definition of a follower of Jesus, it is helpful to identify where we are in relationship with Jesus. Today you will identify where you believe you are along the relationship continuum with Jesus, which will provide a guidepost for your journey.

Review the stages listed in the graph. Note that they are broad groupings and offer a way to look at spiritual growth. The purpose of identifying your stage is not to provide a rigid category but to give you a general idea of where you are currently in relationship with Jesus so that you can begin to identify what your next steps might be as you move more deeply into living a life that is centering on Christ.

John Wesley described the way God's grace is at work in our lives in three stages, which, in large part, mirror this growth in relationship with Jesus: **prevenient grace** (the love of God that begins to be at work in our lives long before we respond in commitment to Jesus Christ), **justifying grace** (the love of God that draws us into a new relationship with God based on God's grace in the death and resurrection of Jesus), and **sanctifying grace** (the love of God that continues to be at work in our lives to enable us to grow into a life that is fully centered in Jesus Christ). We will talk more about these stages of grace in Day 3.

Our relationship with God mirrors the way a relationship develops between two human beings. It moves from stranger, to acquaintance, to friend, to good friend, and finally to intimate friend or lover. Similarly, our relationship with God grows and moves into deeper intimacy and vulnerability as trust develops; as a result, our love for God and for our neighbor matures. As in a deepening human relationship, a key element in the development of our relationship with God is spending time together.

Prior to being introduced to someone, you likely would label the person a *stranger*. You don't know the person — who the person is and what he or she is about. The relationship is formal. There can be apprehension or fear or at least a hint of awkwardness. At this earliest stage of relationship with Jesus, these conditions can be true for those who have yet to experience

the love of Christ. They don't know this stranger Jesus, nor do they know what to expect of the relationship because they haven't experienced the character of God. A person may *ignore*, be unaware of, or be disinterested in God's invitation for relationship. It simply may be that they haven't been introduced.

After interacting with a person a few times, you come to know the person, and the relationship begins to be more relaxed. Your relationship is less formal than that of a stranger, but you still are getting to know each other. You become an *acquaintance*. At this stage of faith, a person is getting to know Jesus and the church. He or she is *exploring* a relationship with Jesus. A person might state that he or she believes in God but is not sure about Jesus or the church.

The next stage in a developing relationship is *friends*. At this point you are *getting started* in a relationship. Starting a friendship means that you have decided to make a commitment to a person. You spend more time together and begin to share your life. The relationship tends to be more at ease and conversational. At this faith stage, a person might say that he or she believes in Jesus and is working on what it means to follow him. The person has made a decision to follow Jesus, has accepted God's grace, and has begun participating in the life of the church.

As the friendship develops, the next stage is *good friends*. The relationship is *going deeper*. This maturing relationship develops through increased time, commitment, and disclosure; it might be described as a relationship that makes a difference in how you live your life. At this stage of faith, a person continues to grow in belief in Jesus and in action to make God's love tangible in the world.

In the final and ongoing stage we become *intimate friends*. Increased fidelity and commitment define the relationship. In the faith relationship, it is a life that is *centering on Jesus*. Following Jesus becomes the most important thing. It's what the Apostle Paul meant when he said that nothing mattered more in his life than knowing Christ. Notice that the word is *centering* and not *centered*. It is not a fixed point but one that continues to evolve. Discipleship is a lifelong experience of continuing transformation by the grace of God.

The hope is that God will draw you into a life that is centering on Christ — one where you are in intimate relationship with God. While progressing in relationship with God moves you along the continuum, it is important to remember that the faith journey is filled with twists and turns along the way. But it is a continuing journey with God.

Your Reflections

At this time in your walk with God, how would you characterize your relationship with Jesus? Circle one:

stranger acquaintance friend good friend intimate friend

How would you describe your relationship with God?

How would you describe your relationship with the church?

How were you introduced to Jesus?

How were you introduced to the church?

How has your relationship with God changed over time?

Prayer

Lord, thank you for your love and the way you invite me into deeper relationship. Show me the way to grow, and help me to center my life on you. Amen.

Week 1: Day 3

God's Role in Growing Your Faith

Scripture Reading

Read the following:

Ephesians 1:15-23

Ephesians 3:14-20

Romans 5:1-11

Today's Message

On Day 2 you identified where you are in relationship to Christ, a marker that provides a guidepost for your journey. As disciples of Jesus, we are striving to live a life that more and more centers on Christ. The good news is that it is not up to us to do this alone! God, the church, family, and each individual all have roles to play, and all of these roles interact and work together to help us grow.

All three cogs of the wheel are required. God does God's part, but we have a responsibility to respond and to put our faith into practice; and the church and family have a responsibility to provide experiences and opportunities to engage with and to nurture us as we grow. Today we will

look at the role of God, who is the initiator of our faith.

God's Role: Grace in the Wesleyan Tradition

In *The Great God Brown*, famed playwright Eugene O'Neill wrote, "Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue." That is a fairly accurate assessment of the human condition and the means by which we humans are brought back to our originally created purpose. That is the role of God — bringing us back to our created purpose through grace. In the Methodist tradition, the "way of grace" or the "way of salvation" is more of a process than an event.

To put it simply, God's role is to mend us through God's grace. John Wesley believed that God's grace is a movement, and he described this movement as a lifelong journey that begins at the moment of birth. He described it as three progressive stages of grace: prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. Notice that these three stages of grace correspond to the relationship stages we reviewed in Day 2.

Wesley effectively depicted these stages of grace in his famous "house metaphor."

Prevenient grace is the front porch — the initial entryway into a life of grace. Prevenient grace means that God meets us where we are, before we have made any decision to follow God. It exists prior to and without reference to anything we may have done. God is calling all persons into relationship, and we can choose how we will respond. Some of us will ignore this call. From that point, God's prevenient grace operates in a person's life to woo and lure him or her in subtle, subversive ways, giving the person the power to choose salvation and overcome his or her originally sinful state. God's grace operates prior to our recognizing or acknowledging it, and it is the very reason that we are able to baptize children.

Justifying grace is the doorway of the house. God's justifying grace declares us saved, restores us to right relationship with God, and enables

us to begin the lifelong work of restoring the tarnished image of God within us. When we choose to become disciples of Christ, we are *justified* by grace. Justifying grace is offered by God to all people. We receive grace by faith and trust in Christ, through which God pardons us of sin. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). This justifying grace cancels our guilt and empowers us to resist the power of sin and to fully love God and our neighbors.

Justifying grace can occur in different ways for different people. It may happen in one transforming moment, as in response to an altar call, or it may involve a series of decisions across time. When we are justified, we leave the front porch and enter through the doorway of faith. But we are never finished. Justifying grace is the starting line.

(Continues...)

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