

Following Jesus

Introduction

Following Jesus, a book by N.T. Wright, contains twelve intriguing Biblical reflections on discipleship. The perfect picture of discipleship can be found in the person of Jesus Christ, and the character of Jesus Christ is portrayed throughout the New Testament. In his book, Wright highlights particularly necessary aspects of discipleship shown through the books of the New Testament. *Following Jesus* is a reflective book, and Wright does an excellent (though challenging) job of making true discipleship understandable and applicable.

Thanksgiving and Praise

Wright begins by addressing the books of Hebrews and Colossians with a theme of awe leading to thankfulness. Hebrews was written to Jewish converts familiar with the Old Testament, and the book repeatedly emphasizes the incompleteness of Old Testament prophecies and stories; not incomplete in a failing sense, incomplete in a “continuing work” sense. Colossians was written to the heretical church in Colosse. Paul rebukes their heresy through the emphasis of Christ’s grandeur. Both books place particular emphasis on the love of God and the things he has done for us.

In reference to Hebrews, Wright says, “... One major thrust of the book [is] to emphasize that the one who has sat where we sit, who has lived our life and died our death, has now been exalted and glorified precisely as a human being” (p. 5). Jesus suffered and was tested far worse than any of us will ever experience, yet he endured it and is therefore able to help us in our struggles. Subsequently, Hebrews emphasizes that Jesus was the final sacrifice, the atonement for our impurities, the truest sacrifice to which all other sacrifices point, and the fulfillment of such Old Testament prophecies.

The letter to the church in Colosse is all about saying “thank you,” Wright points out. In respect of the things Christ has done for us, we should have the desire to show our expressions of thanks in return to God. Paul’s goal in exalting the glory of God to the Colossians (and, ultimately, to us) is to further bring to light God’s disapproval with their (and our) actions.

Hebrews and Colossians both show that a disciple should live in with a spirit of thankfulness toward the wonders Christ has lovingly done for us. This gratitude is imperative to the character of a disciple of Christ. Without showing proper respect for God, His word, His son, and the actions of His son, how is a disciple to portray the importance of a relationship with Jesus Christ to an unbeliever?

Most importantly, we were designed for worship. In Genesis, God created us solely to bring Himself glory and praise, because He alone is worthy of it. A disciple should not just revere the Lord and give thanks out of principle, a true disciple will continually be thankful for everything God has done for them, because Christ has done everything for them.

The Gospels further illustrate this point, though the main emphasis of the gospels is on a different theme. Still, the thoughts and urgencies of thankfulness toward our Savior are evident in Wright's discussion of the Gospels.

The ultimate display of gratitude will be when we all are taken up to Heaven to be with the Lord. Revelation is discussed in chapter 6, and I think reading the description of Heaven and its glories is the most pleasurable, contenting thing. Our belief in the Lord renders us citizens of Heaven, and this is yet another reason for immeasurable thanks. Praise, which we should also be giving here on Earth, will be endless in Heaven. Many of the descriptions of Heaven are so awesome and unfathomable that I can't help but shiver when I read them. That shiver of joy is just an incomparable ounce of the ecstasy we will be praising God with when we're finally in His presence for eternity.

Selflessness Throughout the Gospels

Following Jesus goes on to analyze in three of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, and John) the selfless aspect of discipleship. Their themes revolve tightly around the Glory of God and how it should be reason for not only thanks, as discussed above, but also for complete selflessness.

Through the Cross, evil is defeated. "The cross is the decisive saving act" (p. 29). "He would draw on to himself the pain of Israel" (p. 47). The Gospels and Wright agree that the defeat of evil on the Cross was no simple task. Jesus went through excruciating pain and difficulty, not just on the Cross but also in temporarily subsiding His godly powers to become a lowly human being. This is a selflessness that Christ exhibited that is infinitely beyond anything we could even come close to attaining. If He portrayed such selflessness in order to save us from our sins, and we are to imitate the person of Christ, we too must be completely selfless to be true disciples of God.

Wright comments on the book of John, writing, "As Jesus is lifted up, the living and dying revelation of the love of God, anyone who looks at him will have life [...] the 'lifting up' of Jesus insists that the cross itself is the moment of glory, the moment when sovereign love meets a world in agony and grasps that agony itself" (p. 37-38). The Gospels illustrate that the disciple must have a revered respect for the work that was done on the Cross.

Mark's "servant king" portrayal of Christ is highlighted by Wright. The servant king yet again sheds light on the selfless attitude of Christ. Mark's well-structured, easy-to-read little manual for followers of Jesus shows that we are called to be followers of the Servant King; as such, we ourselves must be servants—selfless.

Too often it seems Christians read the Word of God with only themselves in mind. "How can the Word *help* me today," rather than, "How can God's glory shown to me through His word help me to further His kingdom." We aren't open to

accepting rebuke or correction from the Word. We aren't truly thankful for Jesus Christ and His sacrifice. We aren't selfless. We see his sacrifice as something we can benefit from, so we use it. It's sad to think that we go on this way, but too many Christians are content with living in this manner.

How often do we overlook verses that make us uncomfortable? How often do we spend time in the Word only to say, "Well, that verse must only apply to the Old Testament generation," or to simply overlook a verse altogether when it makes us uncomfortable? For instance, it seems so easy to read only the beginning of Proverbs 8:13, "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way, and the perverted mouth, I hate." Proud, arrogant people annoy me too, so it's easy to agree with God on that one. It's also easy to close the Bible before reading the final part of that verse. Of course, the verse in Proverbs is only one specific example of hundreds in the Bible that our lukewarm generation chooses to ignore.

A true disciple can't pick and choose what parts of Jesus' character to strive after; he must fight to be pure in every way. He must recognize the salvation that Christ gave him and the price Jesus paid for that salvation. He must be *thankful* for these things. Christianity is not a Build-A-Bear religion. A true disciple must love and respect all of God's character, no questions asked.

Renewal

It is impossible to read the New Testament without seeing the theme of renewal. It's the reason we're thankful, it's why we give praise, and it's what salvation and Christ's death are all about. Beyond Wright's discussions of specific books of the Bible, chapter 9, "The Mind Renewed," addresses renewal directly. It is discussed more indirectly in chapters 10 through the end of *Following Jesus* as well.

Wright makes specific reference of the story in 2 Kings 5, where King Naaman had leprosy and was told by the Jewish prophet, Elisha, to go wash in the Jordan seven times. He did so and was healed. To even begin to consider following the suggestion of a foreign god, for that's what Elisha's was, was completely ludicrous. Yet Naaman did it. Though it was difficult, Naaman recognized the truth and asked for forgiveness, not just to cure his leprosy but also eventually of his sin. Through a difficult situation, he recognized the true power of Israel's God.

Similarly, in the renewal process we go through with God, we must do the same. We must put aside our arrogance, recognize the truth of God's Word, and repent of our sins. It was a huge deal for Naaman, a king, to recognize that his own god was not powerful enough to heal him. He reached out to another country and another god for help. We must show a similar sort of humility if we expect God to renew our minds.

Of course, the renewal process isn't a single instance that happens just when we put our faith in Christ. We are renewed daily, the Bible says. Wright says, "Think straight about [yourself]. 'Don't be conformed to this world' – to the [...] false gods, to gods that we worship by default, simply by being a member of a largely pagan society" (p. 79).

As Wright points out, the daily renewal process in our pagan society will be difficult. We must put forth a conscious effort to be different. A Christian who is more comfortable when he's around their pagan friends does not bring any merit to

the Kingdom of God. We can't settle, we can't overlook the verses that make us uncomfortable, and we can't conform. We must be set apart, like the Bible says, in the person of Jesus Christ.

A true disciple must be daily renewed, recognizing their shortcomings and dealing with them before God. In our Christian communities today, we're content to never confess our sins to each other. This puts forth a false portrayal that *we're all alright*. How is this supposed to look to a young believer when they continue to struggle with sin? If we aren't willing to be open and honest with them about our struggles, to admit daily, "Yah, I screw up," how can we expect to teach them? How can we expect them to grow are sitting still, and we most assuredly are sitting still in our spiritual growth if we have stopped confessing our sin before God and Christian brothers and sisters.

Wright further elaborates on a disciples need for daily renewal through his chapter discussions of temptation, Hell, Heaven and power, and new life, mostly through converses. The observance of temptation and the depravation it causes and the loneliness of Hell warrant daily renewal. The splendor of Heaven and the hope of new life are motivation for daily renewal.

Conclusion

Wright provides strong and convicting ideas for being a strong disciple of Jesus Christ; one that I think God would be proud to call His own. We're all lost, and we're all going to make mistakes. The point isn't to be perfect, the point is your heart and attitude, and the things you strive to be. Strive to be like Christ, Wright urges. Not the Jesus the church has made up to please them. The real Jesus, the abrasive Jesus, the selfless Jesus. The Jesus that gave up His own life to save ours.