

What Does It Mean to Be a Christian?

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⚓ 1 Introductory Thoughts

Jesus spoke about two ways: the narrow way which leads to God and which few travel on, and the broad way which leads to destruction. [1] He was well aware that most people would not be willing to follow him and to give God the priority in their lives which he deserves. Sadly, there are many religious and seemingly Christian alternative ways on offer today, which can become quite confusing, even for people who are honestly seeking God. This is one reason we considered it important to write this article. We want to help people gain clarity about Jesus' call to discipleship on the basis of the Bible, though we will have to limit ourselves to the essentials. If you are a believer, this text ought to be an invitation to examine your own life according to the Bible passages and thoughts. We hope it will also help people who do not yet believe to find the way to God as it is described in the Bible.

We want to invite every person to get to know us and to follow Jesus together with us, sharing all the joy and the challenges which arise in connection with going this way.

⚓ 2 The Situation Today

At present around one third of the world's population officially considers itself "Christian". Many of these people, though, do not know what it really means to be a Christian. This fact often causes non-Christians to disregard Christianity because they usually hardly see any difference, if at all, between their own lives and the lives of "traditional Christians".

Jesus himself said that many people who call him "Lord" will have a rude awakening. They will not be able to stand before Jesus, although they had believed they were Christians. We can read about this in Matthew 7:21-23.

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”

These words are a serious warning against religious self-deception. There will be many people who think that they did great things in Jesus’ name and are convinced that they belong to him. But Jesus will turn them away because, although they called him “Lord” they did not act according to his words.

⚓ 3 What Does Jesus’ Call to Repentance Mean?

The people Jesus spoke to were all “religious”. They believed in God and were basically aware that they will give an account to God for the way they lived their lives. And yet, Jesus called them to repent. He recognized the problems in their lives and he addressed them: indifference, religious hypocrisy, self-righteousness, willfulness and their lack of respect for God. He knew that they would be lost unless they repent by recognizing and regretting their sins.

Nowadays there are also many religious people whose lives show that they hardly ask for God’s will in their lives. What Jesus quoted to his contemporaries from the prophet Isaiah is just as relevant today:

You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: “This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;” (*Matthew 15:7-8*)

God sees the heart of a person. We cannot fool God with our religious activities and neither should we fool ourselves. The normal attitude we should have towards our creator is that he deserves the first place in our hearts. This means that we have to make a decision to submit everything to him, as it is expressed in the commandment which Jesus called “the great and first commandment”.

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” (*Mark 12:28-33*)

God loves us with his perfect love. Having a loving relationship with him means wanting to love him with all our strength and heart as a child loves his father. A child does not want to ignore his father’s will but he trusts and obeys him.

The parable of the prodigal son [2] describes well what repentance means. The prodigal son decided to go his own way, seeking happiness far from his father’s house in worldly pleasures and sins. He did not care what his father thought about it. When he realized that the path he had chosen was a dead end he humbled himself and returned brokenheartedly to his father. He regretted deeply the way he had despised his

father's love. He knew that he cannot do anything to compensate for what he had destroyed. The only thing left for him to do was to confess his guilt and to ask for forgiveness, trusting in his father's goodness and mercy. The authenticity of his repentance became visible through his desire to serve his father obediently from then on. His father embraced him, gave him a ring and sandals and arranged a celebration without the slightest reproach. The son's guilt was forgiven, their relationship restored. And so in the son's life there was a completely new beginning—as the father expresses it in the parable:

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. (*Luke 15:24*)

With this parable Jesus wanted to show that God accepts as his child every person who sincerely regrets his sins, forgiving him all his guilt. In this way he offers every “prodigal son” hope that the way back to the Father's house is possible—yes, the Father is even waiting and keeping watch to see when his child will return. Whoever allows himself to be touched by this love will experience repentance as something joyful, like the joy of the son who is allowed to return home. The following words of Jesus also describe this joy:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (*Matthew 13:44-46*)

Whoever realises what a precious treasure it is that God loves us and wants to give us true life, will be ready to “sell” everything else to gain this treasure. If someone is not willing to do that because some things are so “valuable” to him that he is not ready to give them up for God, he will not spend eternity with him, a fact which is visible in the encounter of the rich young man with Jesus.

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honour your father and mother.’” And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (*Mark 10:17-22*)

This man wanted to come to God—and he made efforts to achieve this. But he clung to his possessions. He was not ready to give up everything in order to follow Jesus. But this did not move Jesus to lower his standard. He did not run after the man to offer him a compromise. It does not show love and respect for God if we want to withhold anything from him. With this, Jesus also showed us that we cannot be Christians without the unconditional readiness to place ourselves and everything we have at God's disposal. The following section will make this clearer.

✠ 4 Follow Me! The Cost of Discipleship

In Luke 9:23-26, following the first prediction of his suffering, we read Jesus' clear statement on the seriousness of being his disciple, that is, of life as a Christian.

And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his

cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.”

Despite the seriousness of these words, they are hardly taken seriously nowadays. Among the many people who call themselves Christians, only very few really think about what this passage means. But whoever wants to be a Christian has to ask himself what it practically means for his life to deny himself, take up his cross, lose his life, and not to be ashamed of Jesus or his words. Jesus spoke “to all”, not only to a small number of disciples who wanted to take it especially seriously.

✚ 4.1 Deny Yourself

If we really want to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, we need to be aware that this path requires unwavering determination. We cannot walk this path if we hold onto our own plans, desires and goals because that would create in us an inner conflict in which we would be torn between God’s will and our own and which would rob us of the strength to act. Denying one’s self means letting go of all our self-determined actions and placing our life completely into God’s hands. He alone has the overview and knows best what is good for us and for others. That is why we can trust him more than we can trust ourselves. Whoever is unwilling to submit his own plans and ideas to God will not be able to experience his leading or to serve him.

✚ 4.2 Take Up Your Cross

It is certainly no accident that Jesus spoke these words in the context of predicting his own suffering.^[3] For we, too, will be unable to walk this path unless we are ready to suffer. That is what the cross stands for. The cross makes it clear that Jesus was so strongly in conflict with the world that the world was not willing to bear him. As Christians we will also face conflicts. When we speak God’s word to people and they are confronted with their sinful and wretched state we can expect to face rejection or even ridicule. In some circumstances we will lose our “good reputation” because we tell them things which are uncomfortable for them or by which they feel accused. Jesus said that we should not only be ready to bear this, but even to rejoice when it happens to us.

Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.
(*Luke 6:22-23*)

There are many people who call themselves Christians who are not willing to stand up for Jesus’ words and his demands. They are ashamed to do this because it is not considered modern to believe in an objective truth and to think that Jesus is the one who brought us this truth. They are afraid of being regarded as old-fashioned and intolerant. But this is, in fact, to betray Jesus instead of taking his side. For that reason Jesus will not take the side of such people when they will one day have to give an account to God for their life.

All these thoughts are underlined by Jesus’ words in Luke 9:57-62:

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the

Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests.... Following Jesus is not an easy path. Walking with him can involve renunciation, which we have to be prepared for. Jesus is not saying that as Christians we are not to have somewhere to live. But just as Jesus, who did not establish a comfortable life for himself here on earth, we should also live in the awareness that our real home is in heaven. This should make us ready, here and now, to lose everything that seems to belong to us and to be outsiders in this world.

Let the dead bury their own dead.... Jesus does not want to forbid his disciples from dealing with burials altogether. He saw that this man wanted to give the work in the Kingdom of God a lower priority than his earthly obligations. With these very radical words Jesus showed what the right priority is. As Christians we have the possibility to help people find eternal life, and we should be conscious that this is our most important job.

The “dead” who should bury their own dead are people who do not allow themselves to be called to life by God, and thus are spiritually dead. Consequently they are unable to help anyone else spiritually.

No one who puts his hand to the plough.... Jesus’ answer shows that it is not simply about saying “goodbye”. Jesus recognized that what was behind this man’s desire to take leave of his family was a lack of decidedness. If anyone only leaves his old life behind mournfully and half-heartedly, he will not be up to the challenges which come with following Jesus.

⚓ 5 A Holy Life as the Fruit of Repentance

When a person repents and wants to live as a Christian, like the prodigal son, he will give up the things he understood to be sinful, even if he has to overcome himself. Many people who call themselves Christians do not engage in a serious struggle against their sins. Because they do not want to give up their sins they delude themselves into thinking that they are not really sins at all. Or they think that God is so merciful and forgives anyway because he knows how weak and imperfect we are.

It is important to expose such thoughts for what they are: Excuses. Jesus said that all things are possible for one who believes. [4] When we entrust ourselves completely to God we will experience his help. He does not leave us alone in our temptations and our weakness. We experience God’s grace not only in his forgiving our sins, but his grace also trains us to live our lives in this world so as to please him, as Paul wrote in Titus 2:11-14.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

If we really want to offer our lives to God in service and give up our sins, God gives us the strength to do it. Our lives can then become a sacrifice which is pleasing to God. Serving and obeying him in our daily lives is

what “service” really means.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. *(Romans 12:1-2)*

There are many clear passages in the New Testament which speak about the holy lives of the Christians. Doing God’s will belongs to loving him and God’s love for us means he gives us the strength to do that. Whoever lives with Jesus will bear this fruit.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ...By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. *(John 15:5,8)*

As Christians we are no longer slaves of sin, but servants of God.

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. *(Romans 6:16-18)*

An in-depth article about “[Sanctification](#)” can be found on this website.

⚓ 6 Jesus’ Love: An Example for Every Christian

Jesus’ whole life was characterized by love. Because of his love he left behind his heavenly glory. He became man so that we can get to know how much God loves us and wants to offer us the joy of reconciliation with him. Because of this love he never sought his own advantage, never followed what was pleasant for him, never chose the easier way instead of the right way. Because of love he always spoke the truth and strove to help people learn to see themselves as God sees them rather than being lost in self-delusion. He even bore suffering and death on a cross in order to put people to shame in their pride by his love and humility.

With his loving devotion, Jesus gave us a clear standard. He set no limits to his love and service for others. He gave his disciples, and all who want to be Christians, the command to emulate this love.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. *(John 13:34-35)*

Being a Christian does not mean to have general Christian values and to visit a Christian meeting from time to time, while otherwise living your own life. The first Christians understood this as John writes in 1 John 3:14-18:

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

This means that we are obliged to lay down our lives for the brothers and to love in deed and in truth. What does that mean for us? A natural expression of love is the longing for fellowship. Fellowship among Christians means spending time with one another with the aim to get to know God more deeply, to praise him, serve him, to understand and do his will. In this way the self-denial which belongs to following Jesus becomes a practical reality: Do we want to continue using our spare time for a sport club, computer games or reading novels, as we did in the past? Do we want to work overtime to develop our career so as to be able to buy our dream house? Or are we prepared to change our lives, to give up hobbies and career, giving the right priority to our work and interests so that we have time for our brothers and sisters in faith? Do we have the longing to take part in their lives and to allow them to take part in ours? Do we want to support each other mutually in striving for a holy life? Are we willing to build transparent, sincere relationships in which we are able to admit our weaknesses and confess our sins? Do we want to take time together day by day to understand God and the Bible more and more deeply?

Just as Jesus devoted his life completely to the salvation of people, a Christian will also have this aim in life. There is nothing more important than doing what helps others not only to find God but to remain with him. For it is not self-evident that everyone who has started on the narrow path will also reach the aim. "Without sanctification no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14)—scripture urges us to support one another daily in our struggle for holiness.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today", that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. *(Hebrews 3:12-14)*

We will only receive eternal life if we remain faithful in our obedience till death.

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. *(Revelation 2:10)*

In our article [The Life of the First Christians](#) you can read a more thorough description of the practical application of their love for one another.

⚓ 7 A Christian Loves the Truth

People have made very many attempts to provide answers to the important questions of life and faith. But we can find the right answer, the truth, with God. He reveals himself to us in various ways: through creation, through our conscience and most clearly in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are

truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (*John 8:31-32*)

The knowledge of the truth, the correct understanding of God and his Word is vital for living with him. If we do not allow our own understanding of God to be shaped by the Holy Scriptures, we will believe in our own concept of God, a concept which suits us. But in this way it is not possible to have a relationship with the living God.

A Christian is a person who loves the truth and who really wants to understand God and his will. He wants to allow himself to be shaped by the words of the Bible and to have any wrong ideas corrected and all self-delusion uncovered. Just like Peter, every disciple of Jesus will confess that Jesus’ teaching is the way to eternal life.

Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” (*John 6:68-69*)

Nowadays when we speak with religious people about the Bible we often experience that they try to explain away the passages which challenge them to change their way of thinking and their actions using unbiblical arguments. A Christian, in contrast, submits to the word of God. If we do not, we disregard Jesus himself, who is the truth and who came to reveal the truth to us.

The New Testament underlines the importance of holding fast to the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. As false teachings also lead to a false lifestyle, our salvation is dependent on whether or not we want to follow the biblical teaching. In 1 Timothy 4:16 Paul wrote to Timothy who bore the great responsibility of passing on the correct teaching:

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Holding on to the right teaching also means to distance ourselves from every false influence. Christians have responsibility to examine what other people teach and to avoid spiritual fellowship with people who do not hold to the teaching of Christ.

Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. (*2 John 8-11*)

This issue is also discussed in greater depth on this website in the article [“Keep a Close Watch on Yourself and on the Teaching...”](#)

In summary: A Christian is a person who answers God’s love by desiring to love him in return with all his heart and strength. He has turned away from his old, sinful life and now puts his life completely at God’s disposal. He strives for a holy life in obedience to God and submission to his word. He loves the truth and wants to understand Jesus’ teaching deeply and clings to it. He wants to devote his life completely to loving

his brothers and to strengthening them on the common path with God. He wants to tell those who do not believe or are on a wrong path about Jesus, so that they too can find the true God. The things which concern the Kingdom of God have the highest priority in his life.

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- [Repentance](#)
- [Sanctification](#)
- [The Life of the First Christians](#)
- [The Church in the New Testament](#)

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Footnotes

1. Matthew 7:13-14.
2. Luke 15:11-32.
3. Luke 9:20-22.
4. Mark 9:23.

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