

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO FOLLOW CHRIST?

This is an important question in a day when most people seem to believe in God on their own terms. How many of us would be counted among the small band of former fisherman, public enemies, and prostitutes who followed Jesus? Has our democratic attitude about personal rights, life, and government affected the way we think about authority, obedience, submission, and the lordship of Christ?

Herb Vander Lugt and Kurt De Haan have written this booklet to call us back to an attitude toward Christ that all too often has been forgotten. We pray that this study will renew and deepen your desire to follow our Lord and Leader.

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SOLO OR SYMPHONY?

As the auditorium lights dimmed and the curtain began to rise, the concertgoers ended their conversations and turned their attention to the stage. The conductor strode to the podium and bowed in response to enthusiastic applause.

Then the conductor turned to face the orchestra. He raised his baton and began the concert with a dramatic gesture. What followed was one of the strangest concerts imaginable.

After the harmonious first minutes, only a few musicians continued to follow the conductor's lead. The others seemed to play only when they felt like it, or they played a completely different tune. A violinist sauntered out in front and tried to perform a piece he had written himself. A trombonist broke into a jazz number. Chaos reigned. The audience sat for several minutes in stunned silence, then walked out in disbelief.

Fortunately, the situation described above is fictitious. Skilled musicians who agree to play in an orchestra simply do not behave that way. They sign on with the agreement that they will follow the conductor's lead. They are part of a symphony, not soloists who just happened to be playing at the same time.

Unfortunately, we who have declared ourselves to be followers of Christ can behave as the members of that imaginary orchestra did. We may not like to think so, but we all have a tendency to want to direct our own lives. We tend to focus on self-survival and self-promotion, and we think we are wise enough and strong enough to take care of ourselves. Our goals take on greater importance and urgency than God's goals for us. And again, though we would be reluctant to admit it to anyone, we act as if God is supposed to help us get what we want out of life. This can happen even when we know the truths expressed in the Bible.

Although we are thankful for what Christ did for us on the cross, and we gladly accepted His offer of forgiveness and eternal life, we may have gotten distracted. We may have forgotten that as part of His "symphony"--subjects of His kingdom and members in His church--we are to submit to His direction of our lives. He is the Conductor, the Head, the King whom we serve.

Doing what He wants us to do is what our new life is all about. He longs to lead us through a life that will demonstrate to a watching "audience," the unbelieving world around us, that we know what it means to be His people. He wants us to demonstrate the validity of our profession of faith.

This booklet seeks to point to the essential elements of a life that follows our Conductor's lead. As we do that together with other believers, we will bring beautiful praise to Him. And we will discover the joy of experiencing God's approval both now and forever.

WHAT DOES CHRIST WANT FROM US?

- What does a conductor want from musicians?
- What does a teacher want from students?
- What does a boss want from employees?
- What does a coach want from players?
- What does a parent want from children?
- What does a general want from soldiers?
- What does a ruler want from citizens?

All these relationships have elements in common. Every leader desires his followers to take directions, make use of his help, do whatever is necessary to complete assignments, place loyalty to him above other relationships, and put his teachings into practice.

When we consider what Christ wants from us, we may feel uneasy. After all, how we relate to Christ affects more than a musical performance or the outcome of a ballgame--it affects all of our relationships, our eternal well-being, and our joy here and now.

For many of us the demands may seem too hard to achieve. Even though we may admit that our relationship with Christ is not what it should be, we are afraid of what wholehearted obedience to Him will cost us. The stories of great Christians who spent hours in prayer every day or patiently endured persecution or left everything to serve the Lord may have left us feeling hopelessly inadequate. We wonder what the Lord really expects from ordinary people like us. And besides, so many believers around us seem to have lost their enthusiasm and we don't want to "stick out like a sore thumb." We feel the pressure to conform to the status quo of the Christian community in which we worship and serve. But we know that there should be more to following Christ.

In this study, we will rediscover what it means to be a disciple of Christ. We will see that devotion to Him is not for only a few special people. He doesn't demand the impossible from us. He knows what we are made of, and He will patiently guide us as we learn more and more of what it means to obey Him. He also offers His strength to help us carry out His commands.

The type of life that Christ wants from us can be summarized by four key words: [dependence](#), [risk](#), [loyalty](#), and [imitation](#).

What Does Christ Want From Us?

DEPENDENCE

Jesus said, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. . . . These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:4-5,11).

What have you heard through the grapevine? Jesus used the analogy of a grapevine to communicate the most important element of obedience to Him. Our obedience must grow out of a close relationship with our Lord. Just as a branch of a grapevine produces fruit only as it

is connected to and drawing nourishment from the vine, so too we can produce the fruits of obedience only as we are continually connected to and drawing nourishment and strength from our Lord.

That kind of life, a life of ongoing dependence on Christ, not only pleases Him but also produces the greatest joy in us (John 15:11). So what we are considering is not a morbid resignation to a life of misery as we carry out our duties for God, but a life that will give us the greatest sense of personal fulfillment. That sense of satisfaction and our fruitfulness come as we "abide" in Christ.

How are we to "abide" in Christ? To live in close relationship with Christ, we must depend on Him for wisdom, strength, and direction in life. To have an intimate relationship with Him, we must not be deliberately holding on to some rebellious attitude or action that we know we should confess and forsake. The barrier to our relationship will be removed and we will be forgiven if we confess our sins (1 John 1:5-10).

Abiding also means that we listen attentively to what God has to say to us in the Bible--not merely getting our daily quota of Bible reading for the day but thinking and praying about what we are reading. Just as you show respect and love for a person who is talking to you by carefully listening and responding, so too we need to make our time of Bible reading an occasion to get to know God.

To abide also means that we spend time expressing to the Lord our deepest thoughts, hurts, desires, and details of our lives. He wants us to talk to Him about our successes and our sources of shame. He cares about us.

Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe writes, "Once you have begun to cultivate this deeper communion with Christ, you have no desire to return to the shallow life of the careless Christian" (*Be Transformed*, p.42).

This matter of abiding in Christ is essential if we want to please God. We cannot live the Christian life in our own strength by the power of our own will. We must live with a continual reliance on Christ. Jesus said, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). He didn't say we could do *some* things or a *few* things--He said we could do *nothing* to please God without His working in and through us.

Just as we were saved by God's grace through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8-9), we are now to live for God by trusting Christ. The apostle Paul made this point in his letter to the Galatian believers. He said, "After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (3:3 NIV). And to the Romans, Paul wrote, "In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (1:17 NIV).

Faith requires dependence on Christ, relying completely on Him--first for our salvation and then for the ability to live the Christian life.

What happens when we try to live without depending on Him? If we are not relying on Christ, we end up in one or more of the following conditions. We will be:

- defeated by sinful habits
- preoccupied with a list of do's and don'ts
- self-deluded and hypocritical
- plagued by inner emptiness
- depressed by joylessness
- exhausted by busy self-effort
- frustrated by a sense of distance from God
- trapped by worldliness

What kind of fruit is produced in the lives of those who abide in Christ? Galatians 5 lists several characteristics of someone who is living in dependence on Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit. The "fruit of the Spirit" includes love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (vv.22-23).

The apostle Peter offered the following characteristics as evidence of the kind of life that is growing in Christlikeness (2 Pet. 1:5-7).

- faith
- virtue
- knowledge
- self-control
- perseverance
- godliness
- brotherly kindness
- love

Peter said, "If these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v.8).

We need to evaluate our lives on the basis of the characteristics that Paul and Peter said should be part of the lives of those who are walking with Christ, depending on the Holy Spirit who lives within. Are we bearing spiritual fruit? If not, why not?

How does prayer show our dependence on Christ? David Brainerd (1718-1747) served as a missionary to the Seneca and Delaware Indians of North America and died at age 29. He left a diary that reveals he normally spent at least 2 hours in prayer every day and that he often fasted and prayed for a period of 48 hours. Martin Luther said that when he expected an especially busy and trying day he would prepare for it by spending 3 hours in prayer.

Does this mean that God expects us to pray at least 3 hours every day? Does God want us to set aside 12-hour periods for prayer and fasting? Maybe, but not

necessarily. Although He wants us to pray, He has not given us a minimum time-frame. While all of the believers who made a great impact for God prayed, not all of them spent hours every day in prayer. Some talked with God calmly, simply, briefly, and expectantly. And God answered them too!

When Paul wrote, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), he obviously was not telling us to pray 24 hours a day. He was aware that time is needed for working, eating, and sleeping. But we should be so God-conscious all the time that we are continually in an attitude of prayer about what is going on in our lives.

In John 15, Jesus indicated the importance of abiding in Him if we are to receive answers to prayer (v.7). When we are close to Him, our requests will be in line with His will.

What can we do to remove any barriers in our relationship? First John 1:9 tells us, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This verse is not a formula for salvation. When we accepted Jesus as our Savior, we were forgiven, received into God's family, and made citizens of heaven (Rom. 5:1-2; Eph. 2:1-10). If we have been forgiven, why do we need to confess our sins? And what will happen if we refuse to confess certain sins because we don't want to quit doing them? How detailed must this confession be?

Even though we are completely forgiven the moment we put our faith in Christ as our Savior, sins committed after that point in time can create a barrier to a close relationship with Him. Therefore, we must talk to God about our sins, acknowledging them, accepting His forgiveness, and asking Him to help us gain the victory over them.

When we confess our sins, we express to God our realization that we sinned against Him. We need not plead. We need not ransack our minds to dredge up transgressions that were committed without our realizing it. We need not work ourselves into deep feelings of

guilt. We need only to acknowledge the sins of which we are aware and ask the Lord to help us overcome them.

The demand is simple. But the consequences of taking sin lightly can be very serious. If we decide that we don't want to confess our sins because we don't desire to give them up, we can expect discipline. In Hebrews 12:6-7 we read, "For whom the Lord loves He chastens [child-trains], and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?" When we are willfully disobedient, this chastening may come in the form of sickness and even death (1 Cor. 11:29-30). A joyful Christian life is impossible for those who think lightly of their sins.

The most fundamental issue, therefore, that we must understand to live an obedient life is this matter of dependence. The kind of obedience God is looking for comes out of a relationship of trust and love for Jesus Christ. When we are reliant on Him, obedience will be our heart's desire.

Thinking It Over. How would you describe your relationship with Christ? Are you growing closer to Him, learning more what it means to depend on Him throughout your day for strength, wisdom, guidance, and the ability to serve God through your words and actions? Are you taking time to read the Bible prayerfully, asking God to show you what you need to know and do? Are you setting aside time in your schedule for prayer? Identify the obstacles that keep hindering a close relationship with Christ and ask Him to help you to overcome them.

What Does Christ Want From Us?

RISK

Jesus said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?" (Luke 9:23-25).

What have we gotten ourselves into? Many people have asked that question when they were faced with great personal risk. A mountain climber, for example, may wonder if the risk is worth the thrill of reaching the top. When his muscles feel as if they will give out, when winds whip at him, when doubts

about his safety rope enter his mind, or when his breathing becomes difficult because of the lack of oxygen, he will be tempted to quit.

The same panic can strike a soldier. During World War II, a patriotic young man envisioned himself as a brave fighting man capturing South Pacific islands from the Japanese. So he enlisted in the Marine Corps. He was deeply disappointed when his first assignment was a clerical job. He expressed his feelings to his supervisors and was thrilled when he was assigned to a combat unit. A few months later he landed in Guadalcanal. One of the first sights that greeted his eyes was a truckload of corpses--the

bodies of dead Marines stacked like cord wood. At that moment he thought, *What did I get myself into?*

Many followers of Christ also may wonder what they have gotten themselves into. When they read the words of Christ about taking up a cross and losing their lives for Him, suddenly they may feel that they have signed up for a suicide mission rather than what they hoped would be more like a pleasure cruise. They may have initially been told that if they receive Jesus as Savior He will bring peace and joy to their lives, and they didn't anticipate the hardships.

What does it mean to deny ourselves? It is not the denial of food, fellowship, and other good things just to make ourselves feel miserable. It does not mean developing a weak, nonassertive personality. It means putting Christ's claims and commands above our own desires. If what we know Christ wants from us clashes with what we want to do, we say no to ourselves and yes to Him. That's a big order! But it's neither outlandish nor unreasonable. With God's help we can obey it. And we will be happier when we do.

What does it mean to take up our cross daily and follow Christ? Jesus is asking that we be willing to commit our lives to Him, to follow in His steps, and even to die for Him. It doesn't mean that we must make ourselves suffer or do things just to invite persecution.

To take up the cross may involve much persecution, as has been the case in many countries of the world, or it may involve little. It is the attitude, not the amount of suffering and shame we endure, that counts in God's sight.

What does it mean to lose our lives for His sake? When Jesus said, "Whoever loses his life for My sake will save it" (Luke 9:24), He did not mean that we should seek a martyr's death. His point has to do with how we invest our lives.

If a person invests his life into the pursuit of selfish pleasures and earthly fame, he will "lose it." After all, this earthly system is temporary. On the other hand, the person who invests his life for God will reap great reward. Like the kernel of wheat that is buried and dies, only to spring up and reproduce itself, the believer who "loses his life" will find it in a glorious eternity (John 12:24-25).

Should we really take these words seriously? It is quite obvious that missionaries like David Livingstone, Hudson Taylor, and William Carey took these words seriously. They left all the comforts of life at home and endured unbelievable hardships to take the gospel to foreign countries. The same goes for many today--and not just foreign missionaries. Whether they are translating the Bible, working on an assembly line, programming computers, or caring for children, they can be courageous representatives of the Lord.

How have believers been persecuted? The writer of Hebrews, referring to godly people of the Old Testament era, said they endured "mockings and scourgings," "chains and imprisonments." "They were stoned, . . . sawn in two, . . . slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented" (Heb. 11:36-37). During the early years of the church, Stephen was persecuted and stoned (Acts

6-7), the apostle James was killed with the sword (Acts 12), and the apostles were continually harassed because of their witness for Christ.

Church history tells us that all the apostles except John were executed, and at times during the first few centuries Christians were hunted like wild animals, put to death by being thrown before hungry lions and by being burned like torches. In the centuries that followed, millions have suffered and died as martyrs for Christ. Many people in recent history have suffered for their faith in prison camps or psychiatric institutions. Even in democracies, devout Christians are often made the objects of ridicule and unfair treatment.

Should we expect persecution today? On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus warned His disciples, "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). To Timothy, Paul wrote, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12).

We who believe on Jesus Christ and want to please Him will experience some opposition from people who don't want to follow God's ways. Whether it be at the workplace, at school, in the neighborhood, or even at home, when we choose to do and say what would please Christ, we will find some resistance. People who live only for their own pleasures feel rebuked by the lifestyle and teaching of those who are trying to live out their faith. They express their antagonism by misrepresenting what Christians believe, ridiculing them, or going out of their way to offend them.

How can we avoid needless persecution? While the Bible tells us to expect persecution and teaches us that such trials can be a means of building character (Rom. 5:1-5; James 1:1-8), it never encourages us to seek trouble. On the contrary, it urges us to be good citizens and to go out of our way to please our employers (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:11-25). Paul said we should pray "for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence" (1 Tim. 2:2). We are to live at peace with others--to the extent that we can do so without compromise (Rom. 12:18).

Peaceful conditions, however, present us with a different kind of challenge. We can easily succumb to the temptation to be earthly minded, to live for the things of this world. If we do, then we are the losers. But if we focus on the eternal while enjoying the present, we will enrich ourselves and others. In many ways this is a greater challenge than enduring opposition. And through His Spirit we can be heavenly minded while enjoying life on earth.

Thinking It Over. Has your devotion to Christ caused you to seem "strange" to your friends, co-workers, neighbors, family? Have nonbelievers always responded positively when you talked to them about your faith? Are you willing to let people know that you are a follower of Christ? What happens when you refuse to participate with your friends in an activity that you know would displease the Lord?

What Does Christ Want From Us?

LOYALTY

When speaking to a large crowd, Jesus said, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). Jesus told the Twelve, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:37).

What kind of loyalty does Christ require? A person who enlists in the U.S. Marine Corps lives by the Corps motto *Semper Fidelis*, which means "Always Faithful." He is to remain absolutely loyal to his commanders, and ultimately, to the Commander-in-Chief, the President of the United States. A U.S. Marine pledges his allegiance--even unto death--for the cause of his country. He is not to take orders from enemy leadership, nor is he to quit partway through a military mission. He is committed to be "always faithful."

Semper Fidelis would also be an appropriate motto for followers of Christ. He asks us to put our allegiance to Him above any other relationship. This applies to any people, any material goods, and any self-serving personal goals.

That sounds radical, doesn't it? Christ even used the strong word *hate* to describe the attitude we should have toward all others, even family. He put the matter in such strong terms because He takes loyalty and disloyalty so seriously.

How can family and friends challenge our loyalty? To answer that, let's consider the life of William Carey (1761-1834). When 31-year-old Carey told his wife that he felt God wanted him to go to India as a missionary, at first she didn't want to go. That was understandable since they had three small children and a fourth on the way. Her tears deeply moved her sensitive husband. After talking about it, they agreed that they would go, but not all at once. Their 8-year-old son would go with him and a year or two later she and the younger children would join him.

When Carey's father learned of the plan, he exclaimed, "Is William mad?" Then he did all he could to discourage him from going. Carey, however, believed that God wanted him to go to India. He was determined to please God even though it meant strained relationships with the people closest to his heart.

How was Carey obedient to the words of Jesus to "hate his father and mother, wife and children"? (Luke 14:26). He showed a tender love for his wife, his children, his parents. He didn't *hate* them. This is true if we define hatred as a feeling of malice, which desires harm or hurt for someone. But in the Bible it is used to denote taking action that prefers one person over another. So, we can say of William Carey that he loved the Lord so much that in his actions he appeared to hate his family.

Perhaps you or someone you know has had to face rejection from family members because of a decision to accept Christ as Savior. Sometimes a profession of faith in Christ leads to being shunned by the rest of the family.

Maybe those you love don't like a decision you made to do what is right, to be honest, or to be committed to purity. Maybe they were pressuring you to tell a lie, break a law, or reject biblical principles. In such cases, the choices are painful and heartwrenching. We long for closeness with family members. But if we have to make a choice, our allegiance must go to Christ.

What else competes for our loyalty? In addition to the tension that can be produced in a family by conflict over allegiance to Christ, many other people and activities assume the place in our lives that only Christ deserves.

The apostle Paul warned the believers in Rome, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2). John also told us to beware the lure of the world (1 John 2:15-16). To allow an ungodly culture--instead of Christ--to shape our attitudes and actions is to unwittingly give allegiance to Satan (3:8; 5:19).

Just before the Old Testament leader Joshua died, he challenged the people of the new nation of Israel to affirm their loyalty to the Lord. He said, "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15).

Jesus spoke about something that can pull our loyalty away from Christ--money. That's something we all have to deal with. He said, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon [money]" (Matt. 6:24). And Paul warned that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness" (1 Tim. 6:10).

How is self-centeredness a type of loyalty? In the previous section, we saw how the command to deny self (Luke 9:23) applies to our boldness in risking our lives and reputations for the sake of Christ. In this section, we can apply the command to deny self to the matter of putting loyalty to Christ ahead of loyalty to our self-centered ways of thinking and living.

Self-centered devotion to our own selfish interests is really the heart of sin. Adam and Eve were the first traitors to God's cause, and ever since then all people have tended to put loyalty to self above loyalty to God. Romans 3 reminds us, "There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. . . . There is no fear of God before their eyes" (vv.11,18).

Decisions of loyalty involve the factor of risk also. Noah, for example, chose to live for God instead of following the ways of the people around him (Gen. 7-8; Heb. 11:7). Moses chose to be loyal to God and His people rather than to enjoy the benefits of living as part of Pharaoh's royal family (Heb. 11:24-27). Daniel and his three friends chose to be considered traitors to the king rather than compromise their devotion to the Lord (Dan.

1:8; 3:1-28; 6:1-23). Rahab shifted her loyalty to the God of Israel when the Jews were about to attack Jericho (Josh. 2:1-21; Heb. 11:31).

Yes, God wants you to love your spouse, your children, your parents (Eph. 5:25,28; Titus 2:4). He wants you to show respect for your government. He wants you to love yourself because self-love is the standard by which you must measure your love for your neighbor (Matt. 22:39; Luke 10:27). But your love for God is to be so strong that you put obedience to Him above your own desires and the desires of your family, your friends, your employer, and your community.

Thinking It Over. How does your use of time reveal your loyalties? How do your thoughts reflect your level of devotion to the Lord? What pressures to compromise have you felt at home or at work? Where is your treasure? (Matt. 6:21). Do your standards of behavior reflect God's purity, or are you being shaped by the world?

What Does Christ Want From Us?

IMITATION

Jesus said to His disciples, "You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:13-15). On another occasion, Jesus urged His disciples, "Follow Me" (Luke 9:23).

The apostle John wrote, "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:6). In a letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

What does it mean to imitate Christ? To imitate someone is to copy his or her actions as closely as possible. It is to model our lives after the characteristics of someone we look up to.

Children imitate their parents. Consciously or not, they pick up from Mom and Dad a way of speaking, walking, and relating to people. Through what the parents do and say, the children learn how to respond to the many circumstances of life. If Dad comes home and kicks the dog, his child may think that's acceptable behavior and do the same. And if Dad is careful to be absolutely honest in all his conversations and dealings, then the child often will pick that up too.

As children of God through faith in Christ, we are to imitate Christ. We are to learn what it means to obey God by living as Jesus lived. If we are living in dependence on Him, spending time with Him in prayer and learning about Him in the Bible, we will want to imitate His way of life.

Much of what we have said up to this point in the booklet could be applied to this matter of imitating Christ. So let's first note how we are to be like Him in the three areas we

have already discussed, then we will suggest additional ways that we are to model our lives after His.

How did Jesus show dependence on the Father? Even though Jesus is God the Son, during His time on earth He voluntarily gave up the independent use of His divine abilities in order to identify with us (Phil. 2:5-11). He lived in dependence on the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me" (John 5:19,30).

Christ lived in constant fellowship with the Father. He prayed often, taking time to talk with His Father and receive direction for His ministry.

The author of Hebrews told us that Jesus learned obedience through suffering (5:8). He responded to temptation and persecution in the right way because He was relying on the Father.

How did Jesus put Himself at risk? The most obvious answer is that He was willing to suffer the ultimate agony of enduring the penalty for our sin on the cross. He gave His very life to do what the Father wanted Him to do. Peter wrote, "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps" (1 Pet. 2:21).

In many other ways throughout His earthly life, Jesus took the abuse of people who did not appreciate what He had to say. He confronted the hypocritical religious leaders, condemned the unbelieving, spent time with the outcasts of society in order to bring them salvation, and did what was right no matter what anyone else said.

How did Jesus show His loyalty to the Father? During Christ's temptation in the wilderness, Satan said he would give all the nations to Jesus if He would worship him (Matt. 4:8-9). Jesus, however, expressed His loyal devotion to the Father by saying, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve'" (v.10).

On another occasion, a huge crowd of people had gathered around Jesus. Enemies were accusing Him of being a partner of Satan because He was casting out demons (Mark 3:20-30). Jesus' family said, "He is out of His mind" (v.21). When the message reached Jesus that His family wanted to talk with Him, He looked at the people around Him and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother" (vv.34-35). His loyalty to the Father and His followers took priority over even His family.

In addition to imitating Jesus' example of dependence, risk, and loyalty, we can find other ways that we can follow Him. These ways include how He served others, how He responded to needy people, how He forgave, how He resisted temptation, and how He handled possessions.

How did Christ serve others? Jesus described His life this way: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

The apostle Paul pointed to the life of Christ as our example when he was urging the Philippians to serve one another in love. He told them not to be self-centered but to look out for the interests of others (2:3-4). He encouraged them to adopt the same attitude as Christ, who took the role of a servant and "humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death" (v.8).

In Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians, he wrote, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). Paul wanted them to imitate the self-sacrificing attitude of Christ, especially because it will help people find salvation (10:33).

Jesus demonstrated humble service in a dramatic way when He washed His disciples' feet (John 13). He said, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (vv.14-15). We are to imitate His humility and be willing to put aside our "rights" in order to help others.

This loving service for people is directly tied to our love for God. Jesus said, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). John wrote, "This is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment" (1 John 3:23).

In fact, Christlike love summarizes all the commands that God wants us to obey. When talking to a religious teacher, Jesus said that all the commandments could be reduced to two: Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love people as yourselves (Matt. 22:34-40).

How did Christ respond to needy people? Jesus treated them with love and compassion. He helped the sick and welcomed social outcasts like "tax collectors and sinners" (Matt. 9:10). He was moved with great compassion when He saw the many people who were so spiritually needy, and He longed for more workers who would spread the news that could bring them salvation (9:36-38). He fed thousands of people who were hungry (15:32-39). He graciously gave salvation to a repentant thief who was dying on a cross next to Him (Luke 23:39-43). Even while Jesus was on the cross, He arranged for His mother's care (John 19:25-27). He was patient with doubting Thomas (20:24-29). He gently reassured Peter of His love and encouraged him to remain faithful, even after he had denied the Lord (21:15-23).

How did Christ forgive? In a letter to the Ephesians, Paul told us, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us" (4:32-5:2).

We may not always find it easy to imitate Jesus by forgiving others who have hurt us deeply. But we will experience the joy of forgiveness and the sweetness of fellowship with God to the extent that we forgive those who have wronged us (Matt. 6:14-15).

Just think of all God has forgiven you. Then, realizing that no one has wronged you nearly as much as you have sinned against Him, start praying for those who have wronged you and be willing to forgive them.

How did Christ resist temptation? During His time in the wilderness before He began His public ministry, Jesus faced intense temptation (Matt. 4:1-11). Satan tried to get Jesus to satisfy His hunger by making stones turn into bread. The devil attempted to get Jesus to test the Father's care for Him by jumping off a tall building. And Satan promised a shortcut to rule over the kingdoms of earth if Jesus would worship him.

In each case, however, Jesus responded with the truth and power of God's Word. The writer of Psalm 119 said, "Your Word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (v.11). The apostle Paul referred to the Word of God as the "sword of the Spirit," which we are to use in our warfare with Satan's forces (Eph. 6:17). That is part of God's provision to help us escape even the most powerful temptation (1 Cor. 10:13).

How did Christ view possessions? To a rich young ruler who asked what he had to do to receive everlasting life, and who claimed that he had been a good, law-keeping person, Jesus said, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Mark 10:21). To His disciples Jesus declared, "Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail" (Luke 12:33).

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism (1703-1791), took these Scripture passages so seriously that he lived frugally and gave away his income as fast as he received it. His slogan was, "Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can." By standards of his day he earned a great deal of money, but when he died a few months short of his 88th birthday he left almost nothing. He had practiced what he preached.

Does the Lord demand from all His followers, as He did with the rich young ruler, that they sell everything they have and give it to the poor? Apparently not. His friends, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, continued to live in their Bethany home. As we read the book of Acts and the Epistles, we do not find the apostles making this demand.

The Lord wants us to enjoy the good things He gives us, but He reminds us that we are to share what we have with others, with an eye toward reaping in eternity. We are to realize that money and possessions are temporary, and that we should be much more concerned about investing in heavenly treasures (Matt. 6:19-21).

These are just a few ways we can imitate Christ. As we spend time reading the Gospels, we will discover many other ways that we can become like Him in our responses to various people and to different kinds of situations.

Thinking It Over. Our goal as followers of Jesus Christ is to know Him better and become as much like Him in this life as is humanly possible. That won't happen overnight. It is a process of growing and maturing that will not be complete until we see Him.

If that truly is your goal, how do you need to rearrange the priorities of your daily life? In what ways are you following Christ's example? In what areas of life have you been going your own way?

ENCORE!

At the close of a stirring musical performance, an audience may cry, "Encore! Encore!" That's the crowd's way of telling musicians that they like what they've heard, and they want to hear more.

At the end of the day, after we have finished our work, eaten our meals, responded to all sorts of situations, and related to all types of people, can we imagine Jesus saying, "Encore! Encore!" to us? Would He want a repeat performance tomorrow?

This is not to suggest that He expects us to be perfect today and every other day. He understands that we sometimes fail, that we need to work continually on our lives, that we are involved in a process of growth. But would He be pleased by the progress we are making in our dependence on Him, our willingness to take risks for His sake, our loyalty to Him, and by our desire to be like Him? Would He like an encore?

At the end of our life's day, when we stand before Christ, the greatest words we could ever hear will be these: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:23). His highest praise will go to those who by faith accepted His gift of salvation and who continued to depend on Him.

Jesus is the Conductor of our lives. If we follow His lead, the "music" we produce will receive His "Encore!" now and a "Well done!" later.