



make sense of the 233 million number is a new word to describe people who identify themselves as Christians but have little interest in actually following the teachings of Jesus. Perhaps instead of 'followers,' it would be more accurate to call them 'fans.'

"The word fan is most simply defined as, an enthusiastic admirer. And I think Jesus has a lot of fans these days. Some fans may even get dressed up for church on Sunday and make their ringtone a worship song. They like being associated with Jesus. Fans want to be close enough to Jesus to get the benefits, but not so close that it requires anything from them. They want a no-strings-attached relationship with Jesus.

"So, a fan says, I like Jesus but don't ask me to serve the poor. I like Jesus, but I'm not going to give money or turn in a pledge card. I like Jesus, but don't ask me to forgive the person who hurt me. I like Jesus, but don't talk to me about making sacrifices for others.

"Fans like Jesus just fine, but they don't want to give up the bacon . . ." (Idelman).

Today's reading from the gospel of Matthew is about when Jesus called Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow him. He gave them the ball and they took it. They were committed to being more than fans but followers.

Jesus offers us the same opportunity today. Do we want to be fans or followers? You see, this commitment Sunday is about making that decision. For one thing I know – in order for Johns Creek UMC to be a church that is built to last, it's going to take more than a church filled with fans. That won't cut it. It will take a church filled with followers, disciples.

I am reminded of this whenever I watch a star running back break through holes and find the end zone. The running back gets all the glory but a running back is only as good as his offensive line – guys consistently blocking and following the fundamentals so their running back can score.

This is the way God operates. God often works through the most ordinary and unassuming people to do extraordinary things.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is often credited with starting the Civil Rights Movement but this is not the case. Although King was an extraordinary leader and communicator it was a humble seamstress by the name of Rosa Parks who was the catalyst. She decided to take a stand by staying seated on a bus.

King Duncan notes, "Beginning with the crude manger of Bethlehem no message is clearer in the New Testament than this one – Christian faith is the celebration of ordinary people who come to possess a very extraordinary power."

So, when you are asked to serve Christ and his church, excuses like "I'm too old," or "I don't have enough education," or "I am not skilled enough" don't hold water. God can give you the ability. What God can't do is make your commitment for you! You must do that!

**Another thing we notice in our text that these ordinary people were called to grow with Jesus.** They were called to spend three years of their lives learning from Jesus.

A disciple is one who listens to Jesus and is willing to grow.

A noted author once asked, "How do you distinguish between a flower that is alive and one that is dead?" Then he answers his own question: "The one that is growing is alive." He adds, "The only evidence of life is growth."

The same is true when it comes to our walk with Christ. In 2nd Peter we are encouraged "to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3: 18).

One of the reasons we come to church is to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Let's be honest. The place where most of us encounter Christ and learn about him and grow in our faith is within this building.

This is why I get frustrated when people criticize the church or downplay it. They say, "I can be a Christian without going to church." Sure, you can but not a very good one. Christian maturity does not occur outside Christian community. I don't know any growing Christian who is not active in a local church.

I am concerned about the spiritual health of those folks who have not come back to church since the pandemic. I've spoken to many of them and have told them they are missed. They say, "Yeah, we had this ball game and that trip and this engagement. I guess we have just gotten out of the habit. We hope to be back soon. By the way, I don't feel very close to God." It is not rocket science.

Like every pastor, I am often flabbergasted by how many people disregard their responsibilities to the church. Oh, they will never miss soccer or baseball practice and definitely not a game! They will never miss their daughter's dance recitals or Girl Scout Troop meetings. They will never miss their responsibilities to volunteer at school or attending PTA meetings. But when it comes to showing up for church? One hour every six weeks will do (and that's being generous!).

I sometimes feel like the orchestra conductor who was quite upset over the fact that at every rehearsal at least one member of the orchestra was absent. At the final rehearsal before a big concert he announced, "I would like to thank our first trumpet player. He was the only member of this orchestra who did not miss a rehearsal."

The first trumpet player stood and bowed as the other members of the orchestra applauded. Then he said quietly, "It was the least I could do, considering I won't be able to be at the concert tonight" (King Duncan, "Fans or Followers?").

I know how that feels. Every pastor I know does. The work of the church is critical. Our ministry to little children and

to youth and to adults has eternal implications. The church is charged with the responsibility of making and growing disciples. This is where we are equipped for the work Christ has given us. The church deserves our very best, yet for many folks church is low on their priority list. They just give church their leftovers.

There is a story about another orchestra that was giving a concert in a large church hall in England. The place was filled to capacity.

Afterwards a casual member of that church where the concert was held flippantly asked the pastor of the church when the hall would be filled like that for a Sunday morning worship service. The pastor replied, "It will be filled when like that conductor I have eighty well-trained, committed and disciplined men and women to work with me" (Duncan).

I know I am pushing you hard on this. A few folks have told me that I have been tough on you the last few weeks of this campaign. Well, if not me, then who? Who is else is going to push you to be the church God calls us to be. That's my job. Someone once said that a leader is someone who "motivates people to do what they don't want to do so they can be who they want to be."

Like many of you, I watch a lot of football. I love football. It might be a spiritual problem. Lord, help me. Nick Saban, coach of Alabama, talks a lot about the "Alabama Standard." And folks, especially Alabama fans, are proud of that. Get 'em coach! Well, I am here to lift up the standard of Jesus Christ! Don't you think that is more important? Aren't we proud of that?

I know many of you are Georgia fans. Imagine if Coach Smart invited you to attend a practice session in Athens. Now imagine as you are standing on the field Coach Smart shows up late to practice. He gathers the team around and says, "Now guys, take it easy. I know we are playing Alabama this week, but remember it's just a game. So, don't work too hard." What do you think would happen? The alumni would ride Coach Smart out of Athens on a rail! And yet some folks don't like it when the pastor expects the best from the church?

I had a geography teacher in high school we called "Mr. George." Now, this is true. Everything I tell you is true but this is truer than some of the things I have told you. Everyone wanted to be in Mr. George's class. Why? Well, he would spend the first ten minutes of class reading Trivial Pursuit questions about geography and then he would turn off the lights and put on an action movie for the rest of the class. I loved the class. I aced the class. But when I graduated I could not tell you where Wisconsin was on a map!

But I had an English teacher I could not stand. I can still see her face! She would hand my papers back bleeding to death with red ink. She was tough as nails and would not accept mediocrity. I barely got through the class. But years later when I wrote my first book and it got published I saw her face again.

Which teacher would you like me to be?

This brings us to the last thing we learn from this text. These disciples were ordinary people just as we are. They were called to grow with Jesus, just as we are. Here is the final thing.

There would come a time when they would no longer grow with Jesus, but go for Jesus. Followers of Jesus naturally grow into leaders.

I often think about the collective wisdom, skill and wealth of our church. It is overwhelming to reflect on the amount of talent and resources we have as a church. This means we should never have any problems finding people to teach Sunday School, or work with youth, or sing in the choir, or take on leadership positions, or serve in our stewardship campaigns, or pledge to the church. There comes a time when mature Christian believers realize that they are not called to be served, but to serve. A church that is built to last is made up of people like that. And, contrary to culture, our job as clergy is not to cater to you but to equip you as followers of Christ.

It is to feed Christ's sheep. We need to appreciate that in the church today. We need to move beyond caring for ourselves to caring for others. After all, Jesus told us that the only way we will find life is by giving our lives away. Jesus says to us today, "Do you love me? Then you will support my church in its ministry. Do you love me? Then you will commit to serving rather than just being served. Do you love me? You will pledge and commit your resources to my church."

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus called four men-- Simon Peter and his brother Andrew and two other brothers, James and John--to leave their nets and follow him. He called them not to be fans, but followers. And their legacy as followers of Jesus will live forever.

Lucy O'Brien said, "The most important question a person ever asks is, 'If I die today, what will my life have stood for?'"

Let me put that question to you, even as I put it to myself. "If you were to die today, what will your life have stood for?"

One of my favorite stories is about Abraham Lincoln. During his White House years, he would often slip into the Wednesday night service at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church where Dr. Gurley was the pastor. In order not to disrupt things, Lincoln would listen from the privacy of the pastor's study, which was right next to the sanctuary. Lincoln's young assistant usually came along with him and on one night his assistant asked Lincoln how he liked the sermon. Lincoln replied, "I thought it was well thought-out, powerfully delivered, and very eloquent." The assistant asked, "Then you thought it was a great sermon?" Lincoln replied, "No. It failed. It failed because he did not

ask us to do something great” (Bruce Larson, “What God Wants to Know”).

My preaching philosophy has always been that I have failed if I do not dare you to do something great for God. Today, here is my dare: Be a follower of Jesus, not a fan. I dare you to make the decision to be a follower of Christ by coming down to this altar and leaving a pledge card. Do we really love Jesus? Let’s prove it.

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**Built to Last: Ready for Anything**  
**Daily Devotional Guide**

In my sermon I spoke about the difference between being a fan or a follower of Jesus. My text was Matthew 4:18-22 when Jesus calls Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow him. They immediately dropped what they were doing, left everything and followed Jesus. They weren’t merely fans. They were followers. Jesus requires the same of us. To help equip and encourage us on our discipleship journey with Jesus, our daily devotional guide this week will focus on John 15 and Galatians 5.

**Monday** – Read John 15:1-2. These verses reveal a promise that is both encouraging and challenging. Jesus says that when we begin to bear fruit as Christians God will prune us so that we will bear even more fruit. What this means is that God is never through with us. He is forever empowering us to grow in the likeness of Christ. Sometimes it is difficult to experience the pruning of God. But we know He does it because he loves us and wants us to experience life at its best.

**Tuesday** – Read Galatians 5:22. Ever wondered what kind of fruit we are supposed to produce as followers of Christ? Here is a definitive list. Read the list slowly. Pause after each word and reflect on someone you know who embodies that particular fruit. How does it feel to receive the fruit of that person? Now imagine yourself bearing that same fruit. Ask God to help you bear that fruit. Is there a particular fruit in this list that is difficult for you to produce? God will help you if you ask Him.

**Wednesday** – Read John 15:4-5. Quite often we hear folks talk about how they want to be good people and do the right thing. In these verses Jesus makes it clear that it is virtually impossible to be the people God wants us to be without abiding in Christ. John Wesley often wrote about God’s sanctifying grace – the grace of God that empowers us to bear fruit. We cannot be the people God desires for us to be unless we are consistently connected with our Lord through prayer, Bible study and worship.

**Thursday** – Read John 15:6-11. Notice the key to abiding in Christ is love – His love for us, our love for him, and our love for others. When we remain in this love, nothing can distract us from living out God’s will in our lives.

**Friday** – Read John 14:12. When the Spirit of Christ abides in us, we are able to accomplish more than we would ever imagine. If we would simply be bold enough to rely on Christ to accomplish his work through us, we would be amazed at what Christ could do with us. If we are not attempting great things that require us to rely on the power and wisdom of our Lord, are we really being faithful?