

Follow: Learning from Matthew to Live Like Jesus

Faith UMC Lent Bible Study, 2025

Introduction

Remember that strange moment in history when one of the hottest fashion trends was wearing a WWJD bracelet? This was the early 2000's. The preteens and teenagers of this time will remember when the cool kids *and* the nerdy church kids like me were wearing simple fabric bracelets with the letters "WWJD" printed in all-caps, the abbreviation short for "What Would Jesus Do?"

Did you wear a WWJD bracelet? I did. Almost everyone I knew did. These things were "trending" before the word "trending" was, well, a trend. Some bracelets were solid colors like navy blue and highlighter yellow, but mine, the one I chose from a pile of bracelets in my youth pastor's office, was rainbow with "WWJD" sewn in white thread.

This is the story behind why I took mine off.

WWJD Exposed

My closest friends in high school were church kids like me. We were leaders of a Christian club at our high school, a chapter of a national Christian youth organization that had the explicit agenda of evangelizing to students on campus. This club was the only extra-curricular where I had an official leadership position, it looked good on my college application, and it was my main friend group.

Our club met on Tuesday afternoons in a Physics classroom. We ate Oreos, played ice-breakers, took turns leading Bible study like wannabe youth pastors, and went on retreats – meaning, we ordered takeout from Chick-Fil-A and crashed at someone's house - to plan new ways of leading our non-Christian classmates (and the AP European History teacher) to faith in Christ. These plans never actually worked, but we had fun planning them.

I liked these people because when I was around them, I felt seen. I was one of the nice kids. I never partied or gave the impression of being anything less than a holier-than-thou rule-follower. Most importantly, I wanted to be a real Christian, not a Christian in label only, someone who practiced what Jesus would actually *do*, just like it said on our WWJD bracelets, and I thought my Christian friends wanted the same thing.

But during my senior year, I noticed a disturbing trend in the group. My friends didn't reflect the Jesus I was reading about in the New Testament, and I was pulling *away* from Christ the more time I spent with them.

These friends were certain that huge portions of humanity were going to hell like they'd already been there and could prove it. They gossiped about people who were less Christian than we were: the partiers, the rule-breakers, the athletes, the not-so-modest dressers. Our group didn't participate in any service to the poor. We didn't support any of the groups on campus that were collecting food and clothing for the less fortunate. My friends decided a girl couldn't serve

as “Captain” of the club because the Bible forbids it. My friends routinely talked about people who were not like them, meaning anyone who did not fit their vision of fundamentalist Christianity, as less than us and needing saving by us.

Most disturbing of all, I noticed I began to look less like Jesus when I was around these people. My friends and I wore “What Would Jesus Do?” on our wrists, but the closer I grew to this friend group, the more I felt I was sliding away from the actual Jesus. The bracelets themselves were supposed to hold us accountable for living like Jesus, so why weren’t we becoming kinder and more compassionate like Jesus? Why weren’t we serving the poor and making friends with the non-religious crowd like Jesus did? And why were we being judgmental, preachy, and basically a breeding ground for hypocrisy? Didn’t Jesus have problems with religious types like us? Weren’t we supposed to be practicing what Jesus would actually *do*?

I was too chicken to leave this friend group while I was still at school with them, but when I graduated, I decided to jump ship and abandon Christianity because I didn’t want anything to do with a religion that didn’t look like the Jesus of the New Testament. I took off my rainbow WWJD bracelet and lost it on purpose. Thank God, my United Methodist campus ministry saved me, and here I am, a pastor.

But in the 20 years since I first put on the WWJD bracelet, I’ve never been able to shake this problem: why is it that Christians *don’t* do what Jesus would do?

The problem lies at the heart of the question itself, What Would Jesus Do? The question assumes that the Christian already knows the answer to “What Would Jesus Do?” But what if that’s not true? What if we simply don’t know?

Sometimes we know how Jesus would respond to the particular situations of our daily lives, and in our best moments, we shine Jesus to others like a lighthouse pointing the way home. But there are other times when we’re at a loss to know what Jesus would do. In those moments, we don’t know how Jesus would respond to the threats and worries of our era, we don’t know what behaviors Jesus would choose for our life *today*, and we don’t know what Jesus would have us do with the people who exhaust us, ask too much of us, or downright disturb us.

You might say, “Jesus would love. He’d choose love every single time.” And I’d say, “You’re absolutely right. Jesus would choose love. But what does that mean?” What does it look like for Jesus to choose love? I know what it would look like for *me* to choose love, but what about Jesus choosing love? Can we honestly say we know how to love like Jesus would love? For the question isn’t “What would Jesus do if he were me?” The question is “What Would Jesus Do?”, and if we’re to maintain an honest heart, we must confess there are times when we don’t know what Jesus would do if we let Jesus be Jesus rather than a reflection of our best intentions.

Ultimately, the message of the bracelet was misleading. The bracelet was a reminder to live like Jesus, but the problem my friends and I had was that we simply didn’t know how to live like Jesus. We didn’t need *reminding*; we needed *training*. Much like my high school self, I don’t need a daily reminder to do what Jesus would do; I need a training program to know how Jesus would show up if Jesus were living my life.

So, dear fellow traveler, we're left with this question: How does a person train to live like Jesus? That is the question driving this Bible study, and it's why I'm inviting you to study Matthew with me. Matthew tells us how to train in the way of Jesus. Matthew summarizes this training in one word: follow.

Onboarding Required

I'm inviting you to study the Gospel of Matthew because Matthew is interested in believers in Jesus becoming followers of Jesus. I'm writing this study for people who want to make that leap, from *believers-in* to *followers-of*.

It's one thing to convert to Christianity; it's an entire other thing to follow Jesus. Following Jesus is a lifelong process of conversion where the entirety of a person comes to look like Jesus. Following Jesus is a matter of training in how, really and truly, a Christian comes to know Jesus and lives as the answer to "What Would Jesus Do?"

We're not born knowing Jesus. Therefore, we need training. Training is how we learn how to do what Jesus would do in daily practice. Without training, Christianity morphs into counterfeits posing as Christianity, pretenders such as Christian nationalism, because these counterfeits depend on people opting into a "believing only" faith and dropping the Jesus lifestyle.

The Gospel of Matthew is the Gospel for training in the way of Jesus, and as such, Matthew is interested in *practice*. Matthew wants us to be practitioners of faith in Christ. Following a person is made of practicing what that person does. Rather than stay at belief in Christ and belief *only*, meaning, you have the right ideas about who Jesus is and what his life, death, and resurrection mean for the world, Matthew wants us to supply an answer to the question, "What Would Jesus Do?" for every moment of life. Matthew's vision of a life of faith doesn't live in the mind; it lives in the body, where faith is meant to be lived out.

Does having the right beliefs about Jesus matter? Of course it does! Doctrine matters. I want my congregation to know in their minds the hope we have in Christ. But faith that lives in the mind alone isn't faith; it's philosophy, and the life of faith we'll find in Matthew isn't a philosophy. It's a way of living like Jesus because you've placed yourself under the teachings of Jesus and you plan on staying there, at Jesus' feet, for the rest of your life.

Does that mean the goal is living like Jesus perfectly every single moment of the day? Not quite. The goal isn't *perfection* but *imitation*. The goal of the Christian life is imitation of the life of Jesus. Will we mess up? Of course we will. We're human beings, not Jesus beings. We'll never hit the center of the bullseye every moment of our lives, and we shouldn't try, because Jesus isn't a target to hit perfectly but a person to imitate persistently. The purpose of Christian living is persistence in the practice of imitating Jesus. That means we practice at *learning* what Jesus would do, *doing* what Jesus would do, then *repeating* what Jesus would do with persistence, day-in and day-out, knowing we'll fall short but showing up to practice anyway.

For such a life, we need training. In the workplace, this type of training is called onboarding.

Imagine sitting down at your desk on your first day at a new job. You need to answer the phone. You need to check your email. You need to know how many vacation days you have. You need to know what the company culture is, what sorts of behaviors are allowed and what will get you fired. You need to know where the bathroom is. As you stare at your blank computer screen, the truth hits you: I don't know how to do any of these things because no one showed me. No one onboarded me. No one trained me for this job, so I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing here.

The Gospel of Matthew is like an onboarding manual for the job of Christian living, where the training material is nothing short of Jesus himself. Our task is to immerse ourselves in the onboarding and practice, practice, practice the Jesus we're learning. What Matthew would love to see is a generation of practicing Christians, where we learn Jesus, do what Jesus hired us to do, then we do it all over again.

Here's a bit more about Matthew and his context before we move on to an outline of this study.

Matthew and the R-Word

The Gospel of Matthew was written in the last quarter of the first century, between 75 and 100 AD. The author of the Gospel is anonymous.

The church has traditionally named this Gospel the "Gospel of Matthew" because, for most of church history, the church believed that the author was Matthew the Apostle. This Matthew was the Jewish tax-collector who quit his job to follow Jesus (Matthew 9:9).

But given the author never identifies himself, there's another possible explanation to the choice of the name "Matthew." The Greek word for Matthew is *Matthaios*, which is close to the Greek word for "disciple," *mathétēs*. The word "disciple" is such a big deal in this Gospel that the proper name "Matthew" could be a nickname for the word *mathétēs*, as if the Gospel's title was actually "Disciple" but the proper name "Matthew" was used as a clever play on words.

The dominant theme in Matthew, besides the theme of Jesus being the Messiah, is the importance of discipleship. The word "disciple" means student, learner, or apprentice, and appears 72 times in Matthew. A disciple is one who learns from a teacher, but the learning is more character than content. A disciple devotes his or her life to imitating the teacher, learning the ways of the teacher so intimately that the disciple's life mimics the teacher's life. The best verb to describe what a disciple does is *follow*. The disciple follows the teacher for years, even decades, so that the disciple can learn all that makes the teacher, the teacher.

In Matthew, we'll find that Jesus is on a mission to save what we would call the "religion" of Israel. The word "religion" doesn't show up in Matthew. Instead, what we'd call "religion," Matthew simply calls "disciple."

Yes, I know, I used the R-word. The word “religion” gets a bad rap, as it should. We don’t want to be associated with anything that smells like religion. The idea of religion causes an implicit word association with other words and phrases like “hypocrisy,” “greed,” “corrupt,” “money-laundering scheme,” and “irrelevant.” No one wants to be associated with brands like that, so we avoid the labels “religion” and “religious” like the plagues they’ve often been.

The result has been a mass exodus from religion and religious activity. According to a Gallup report in 2020, less than half of American adults (47%) said they belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque, the lowest percentage in Gallup’s eight decades of polling. “The decline in church membership,” writes Jeffrey Jones, CEO of Gallup, “is primarily a function of the increasing number of Americans who express no religious preference.” The percentages of American adults who do not identify with any religion, or the “nones”, sits at 21% as of 2020. That means about 1 in 5 American adults do not claim any religion at all.¹

It feels like there are only two choices in our culture when it comes to “religion” and being “religious.” One can either be a religious person, or one can be outside of religion totally. You can have two feet in religion, or two feet out; there is no middle way, and the latter way is on the rise. Again, I get it. Religion is responsible for horrible things, and let’s face it, religion can feel obsolete, and who wants to be associated with something like that?

But what if there was a middle way? What if there was a way of being religious that didn’t compromise the integrity of a life of faith but also avoided the worst of what we typically associate with religion? As a pastor, I want this middle way, both for my church and for myself. I want the purpose, meaning, community, and identity of a life of faith, and I *don’t* want the baggage of religion. I’m not alone. According to Barna, a Christian polling agency,

As of November 2023, a remarkable 82 percent of U.S. adults say they believe or are open to the possibility that a spiritual or supernatural dimension exists. Additionally, 74 percent express a desire to grow spiritually, and 79 percent affirm their belief in a higher power.²

Why does CrossFit look more like a cult than exercise? Why do people shell out thousands of dollars on once-a-week religious experience called “football?” Why do people take off work for spiritual pilgrimages to large festivals called “concerts” where they can sing, dance, and belong with a community of peers who *follow* the same public figure? Why do we take retreats in the sanctuary of nature?

Because we’re trying to scratch the itch of religion without calling it “religion.” God put this itch inside of us when God created us in God’s image (Genesis 1:27), and we’ve been finding ways to scratch this itch ever since Adam and Eve turned their backs on perfect communion with God.

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

² <https://www.barna.com/research/spiritually-curious/>

What people are after, what we *need*, is a middle way. This middle way wouldn't be "religion" or "not religion" but a "better way of being religious." This way would be the Jesus way. We don't even have to use the word "religion" because Jesus doesn't use it, either. We can use the word He used: disciple.

This is why I love Matthew, and why I want us to take Matthew seriously. Matthew offers us a better way of being religious. He doesn't call it religion. He calls it being a disciple of Jesus. What religion was meant for was a lifestyle of following Jesus. Matthew tells us what this lifestyle is all about, so we can answer the question, "What Would Jesus Do?" with an enthusiastic, "I know!"

The Six C's

This study is structured around six themes. Each theme captures a main idea in the Gospel of Matthew and a core element of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. My hope is that understanding these six themes will help you (and me) understand the Gospel of Matthew and follow Jesus more closely.

This study is intended for a six-week group study during the season of Lent, though it would be helpful for any season of the year and for individual study. The best way to use this study, whether in a group or in person, is to use it while reading through the entire Gospel of Matthew. This study will supplement and clarify the Gospel of Matthew by diving deeply into the six themes. My church will be reading the Gospel of Matthew together on a 40-day reading plan through Lent. We'll come together in small groups once a week to discuss the readings and the theme for that particular week. It's a good practice for each group member to read the corresponding theme's chapter in advance of the meeting.

Each theme starts with the letter C: Coaching, Compassion, Courage, Co-Creator, Conviction, and Community. These six themes are a good summary of what Matthew is about and what a lifestyle of Jesus looks like. These themes are not meant to be exhaustive. They're intended to help us understand what it means to be the living answer to "What Would Jesus Do?"

In Week 1, we'll study Coaching under the Master. The Master, of course, is Jesus, and the kind of coaching he offers is a life of discipleship where we learn from Jesus, follow Jesus, and repeat the learning and following daily. We'll study Matthew 5:1-11 and most of the Sermon on the Mount.

Week 2 is about Compassion to Humanity. We'll unpack Matthew 9:35-10:2, where Jesus sends out the twelve disciples for a ministry of compassion. We'll see the way of Jesus *must* include a lifestyle of compassion for all human beings.

Week 3 is Courage to Trust. We'll see Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee in Matthew 14:22-33. One of the skills of a disciple is trusting Jesus, and we'll explore what that means through several passages in the middle of the Gospel that deal with putting our whole trust in Jesus.

Week 4 is Co-Creator of the Future. We'll read through Matthew 20:1-16, the Feeding of the Five Thousand, as a foretaste of God's good future, what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God. Anyone who follows Jesus is also signing up to be a co-creator of the Kingdom, a builder of the future to come. We'll walk through the Feeding of the Five Thousand and other passages about the Kingdom of God.

Week 5 is Conviction to Change. A life of following Jesus must include a change of life, which starts with a conviction of the heart and leads to a transformation of thinking, doing, and being in the world. We'll explore the parables that Jesus preaches during Holy Week, starting with the Parable of the Bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1-13.

Week 6 is Community of Healing. We'll end our journey together with the events of the Last Supper, the arrest in Gethsemane, Jesus' mock trial, and his crucifixion. We'll explore how Jesus calls the disciples, including us, to participate in a community of healing where we receive God's forgiveness, extend it to others, and walk through life together as persons who are simultaneously being healed and healing those around us.

Matthew asks us to follow Jesus. There *is* something more to Christianity than simply doing what Jesus would do. The "something more" is following. Follow Jesus so you know what it is Jesus would *actually* like you to do. The Christian bears Jesus' name, reputation, and ministry in the world. We would do well to follow before we speak or act. Let us take our place at the Master's feet, for that is where we belong, students in training together.