

# **UN** FOLLOWERS

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

Copyright © 2014 by Wesleyan Publishing House  
Published by Wesleyan Publishing House  
Indianapolis, Indiana 46250

This guide to be used in conjunction with *Unfollowers: Unlikely Lessons on Faith from Those Who Doubted Jesus* by Derek Cooper and Ed Cizewski (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2014).

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce the contents of this publication for ministry or educational purposes. No portion of this publication may be reproduced for profit without prior written permission of the publisher.

# CONTENTS

About This Guide	4
Introduction	5
1. John the Baptist	6
2. The Townspeople of Nazareth	7
3. The Pharisees	8
4. The Galileans	9
5. The Rich Young Ruler	10
6. Judas Iscariot	11
7. The Judeans	12
8. Herod and Pilate	13
9. Caiaphas	14
10. The Emmaus Disciples	15

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

**D**erek Cooper and I wrote *Unfollowers* with small group study in mind, and we've kept this leader's guide as simple as possible for either individual or small group study. To that end, we offer a brief summary of each chapter, a series of questions, and a closing prayer based on the topic in the chapter.

You'll get the most out of this study guide if you read the assigned Scripture passage along with the relevant chapter. Since each chapter of *Unfollowers* provides significant commentary, small group leaders will find each chapter's content especially helpful when preparing for their meetings. The summaries at the start of each section in this study provide a quick refresher for leaders as they prepare to lead a group discussion.

Although *Unfollowers* adopts an unusual approach to the gospel stories, the questions and challenges it raises are grounded in the everyday choices and struggles we face as followers of Jesus. Jesus challenged his original audience, asked difficult questions, and showed a way to life that was anything but easy and intuitive.

*Unfollowers* aims to capture the tension that Jesus created. To that end, our discussion questions are sometimes challenging and disruptive. We encourage leaders to adapt our questions for their particular contexts without sidestepping the finer points in each story that may leave us unsettled.

We found this book to be among the most challenging projects we've ever worked on, and we hope and pray that your time reading it will be both as convicting and encouraging as it was for us to write it.

—Ed Cyzewski

# **INTRODUCTION**

## **LUKE 11:46-51**

### **SUMMARY**

Anyone can see the mistakes of a past generation. It's far more difficult to spot the ways we could be missing God today. While we can spend quite a bit of time learning from the people who got Jesus right, there are also lessons we can learn from those who got Jesus wrong. In fact, the Gospels share a number of stories about people who wrestled with control, greed, or doubt. Some had air-tight beliefs with no room for God to work. Others had fixed expectations about God's plans for the future. The more we learn about these characters, the more we'll be able to see the ways our faith can become sidetracked. The "unfollowers" don't show us the path forward, but they do show us where our faith can lose its way.

### **DISCUSSION STARTERS**

What is the risk of failing to understand the doubters and unfollowers of Jesus?

How did hindsight impact the way the teachers of the law looked at the Old Testament prophets?

In what ways could we make the same kinds of mistakes today when looking back at the gospel stories?

What might Christians today have in common with the teachers of the law?

How is this story about wisdom and humility?

What are some barriers or distractions that could keep us from God?

### **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus Christ, when we exalt our own righteousness and wisdom over previous generations, remind us that we are wholly dependent on you for life, wisdom, and holiness. Teach us to live as branches connected to Christ our vine so that we will never place our confidence in our own wisdom. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

# **1 JOHN THE BAPTIST**

**MATTHEW 3; 11:1-6**

## **SUMMARY**

If anyone should have followed Jesus, it was John the Baptist. The divine events surrounding his birth and mission gave him multiple points of confirmation that he would prepare the way for the Lord. Nevertheless, John's doubts about Jesus at the end of his life serve as a cautionary tale about the ways our expectations for God can get in the way of the work he wants to do among us. The doubts he harbored in Herod's dark prison prompted him to go so far as asking Jesus if he truly was the Messiah. While we are hopeful that John kept the faith, his monumental struggles with doubt raise questions about how we can miss out on God's work among us.

## **DISCUSSION STARTERS**

What got in the way of the prophecies and visions that assured John's role as the herald of the Messiah?

How did retelling the stories surrounding John's birth help or hinder his mission?

List the reasons John had for believing that Jesus was the Messiah.

List the reasons John had for doubting that Jesus was the Messiah.

Why did John send his followers to ask Jesus about his identity?

What does Jesus' response tell us about the ways our expectations can undermine our faith?

How could preserving the memories of God's past work help or hinder the way we follow Jesus today?

In what ways might we create God in our own image today?

Did John the Baptist have a successful ministry? Why or why not?

## **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus Christ, when we fail to remember the ways you've worked among us and the promises you've made, renew our minds and break through the distractions that keep us from you. Save us from the urgencies of today, and give us eyes to see the ways you're working among us. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

## **2 THE TOWNSPEOPLE OF NAZARETH**

**LUKE 4:14-30**

### **SUMMARY**

There may be no greater struggle for many Christians than disagreements with their families over their faith. A family member with different theology or who is openly hostile to Christianity can cause significant heartache and conflict. The people of Nazareth had many reasons to be suspicious of Jesus, so when Jesus announced his mission in the Nazareth synagogue, he created quite a stir. However, when he said that God would work among the Gentiles rather than the people of Israel, they nearly killed him. Besides pointing out the conflicts that come up with family over faith, this chapter shows us that familiarity can get in the way of following Jesus. Sometimes a lifelong follower of Jesus could face significant struggles in seeing Jesus for who he truly is.

### **DISCUSSION STARTERS**

- What does the Bible teach about the relationship of a family to a prophet?
- How has your own family helped or hindered your faith?
- Why would Jesus' family and hometown friends look down on him?
- What do you think was the root cause for the people of Nazareth to reject Jesus?
- How did the stories of Elijah and Elisha shape the expectations of Jesus' audience?
- What does this story teach us about religious insiders and religious outsiders?
- When have you seen God work in unexpected places or among unexpected people?
- What would it look like to remain open to the supernatural work of God in our lives today?

### **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus Christ, when we have become too comfortable and familiar, taking your love and power for granted, call us back to quiet intimacy with you. Come among us today and reveal the people you're working among and the ways we can join you. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

# **3 THE PHARISEES**

## **MATTHEW 9:1-13**

### **SUMMARY**

The Pharisees were experts in remaining pure before God, but they failed to see that the law called them to heal others and restore justice to their communities. They were completely unprepared for a Messiah who welcomed sinners on the outside and who threatened their reputations if they dared to be associated with him. Rather than seeking ways to restore notorious sinners, they only sought ways to stay away from them.

### **DISCUSSION STARTERS**

How did Jesus' approach to "notorious sinners" differ from the Pharisees?

Who are the wrong people today? What does the example of Jesus teach us about associating with them?

What are some standards that Christians have been taught to follow? How are they helpful? How are they problematic?

What do these stories teach us about holy living? How can spiritual practices serve as both obstacles and steps forward for faith?

How did Jesus respond to the Pharisees? What does Jesus show us about the fine line between justifying ourselves and responding to critics?

In what ways could defending one's reputation get in the way of loving others?

What gets in the way of thirsting for God?

How has criticism from religious people impacted your faith?

What does Jesus teach us about responding to a critic of our faith?

These are stories about image management. Take some time to ask God who you're supposed to reach out to this week. Are there people who need your help even if being associated with them could damage your reputation?

### **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus Christ, when the fear of criticism keeps us from loving others, help us to see your boundary-breaking love for us. May we pass on to others the forgiveness and acceptance that we have first received from you so that we can become reconcilers and healers. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

## **4 THE GALILEANS**

**JOHN 6:25–66**

### **SUMMARY**

This is a story about identity and expectations—these people thought they were insiders with God. They thought they knew exactly how God would come to visit them. They had clear expectations about what kinds of signs the Messiah would give them. They were not ready for the Messiah to give them a completely new identity, forcing them to rethink the salvation God offers. This story also points us to the tension of doubt and the ways that we can hold onto Jesus imperfectly even if we don't have all of the answers.

The Bread of Life called on a series of familiar symbols from the story of Moses: bread in the wilderness and passing through water. Jesus didn't just provide something different from what the people expected. He asked them to rethink their identity.

### **DISCUSSION STARTERS**

What does provision from God look like?

What happens to our faith when God doesn't work in the ways we expect? What if God completely confounds us?

What were the people of Galilee waiting for?

How did Jesus' miracle both reinforce and challenge their expectations about him?

What did Jesus want the people to want?

What did Jesus' disciples make of his teachings about the bread of life?

What does this story teach us about depending on God for provision?

When have you been surprised by the provision of God?

### **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus Christ, when we reject your provision and blessings in favor of our own desires and dreams, remind us of your love for us and your promises of provision for your children. Help us to let go of our plans for the future so that we trust you with the results of our plans and learn to contentment with your provisions. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

# **5 THE RICH YOUNG RULER**

**MARK 10:17-31**

## **SUMMARY**

Money becomes a barrier to faith in a variety of ways. Money can keep the wealthy from the kingdom of God, and it can become a measure of God's faithfulness. The rich young ruler and his contemporaries created an oversimplified system for blessings and curses, and he sought the validation of Jesus for his lifestyle. If this wealthy man could not enter God's kingdom, who could?

It's easy to slip into despair over a story like this, but it prompts us to ask important questions about what keeps us from God and the role of money and possessions for Christians today. This story prompts us to rethink the way we look at possessions and the marks of God's approval.

## **DISCUSSION STARTERS**

What is the sign of God's blessing and approval? What is the sign that God has answered a petition for help?

What is your initial reaction to this story?

What do you think the rich young ruler really wanted from Jesus?

What are the signs of God's blessing and favor?

How would someone living below the poverty line read this story differently?

How has your financial situation impacted your prayer life?

How does this story speak to the way you prioritize money and possessions?

In what ways does Jesus offer you freedom in this story?

Take some time to consider what keeps you from Jesus.

## **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus Christ, when we value our possessions and personal goals over the life you offer, lead us to confession and repentance. Replace our desire for security with a wholehearted dependence on you. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

## **6 JUDAS ISCARIOT**

### **MATTHEW 26:1-13**

#### **SUMMARY**

Judas Iscariot may be the most tragic character in the Gospels. He was probably the most educated and savvy of Jesus' disciples, and he surely valued being an insider with the Messiah of Israel. What went wrong for Judas? He clearly had big plans for Jesus and himself, but Jesus didn't conform to his expectations. Judas gradually drifted away from Jesus, making his own plans. In order to make his own plans come together, he gradually slipped away from God until he became the catalyst for a murder conspiracy. Most people will never drift *that* far from God, but the story of Judas is a stark reminder of the ways our plans can overshadow the direction of God in our lives.

#### **DISCUSSION STARTERS**

When have you felt like God betrayed your plans?

Is there anything about Judas that makes him a sympathetic character?

Judas saw Jesus use two different standards for the poor widow and the wealthy woman with the perfume. How do you think this relates to the way we relate to others today?

Judas was completely committed to his own plans. When his plans didn't work out, he hatched a new plan rather than consider what Jesus could have had in mind.

How does the contrast between Judas and Peter challenge our faith today?

#### **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus Christ, when we confuse our own plans with your will, show us the ways we've gone astray and renew our minds with your Holy Spirit so that we can discern the path to life. Teach us to begin our days in humble dependence on you. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

# **7 THE JUDEANS**

**JOHN 5:1-18**

## **SUMMARY**

The Judeans defined their identity by obeying the law. In addition, faithfully waiting for the Messiah meant they had to obey the teachings of the law and the traditions that had been passed on to them. When Jesus confronted them on the Sabbath about what the Sabbath is intended for, they returned to their theology rather than asking whether God may be working in their midst. Ironically, their commitment to waiting for the Messiah made them unable to see the Messiah in their midst.

## **DISCUSSION STARTERS**

What matters most to God? How could we misunderstand what is most important to God?

Why did Jesus ask the man if he wanted to get well?

In what ways can you relate to the crippled man?

In what ways could we fail to observe the Sabbath in the midst of trying to observe it?

How is a church community both helpful and limiting for shaping our beliefs?

When have you been prompted to change your beliefs? What was at stake?

## **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus Christ, when we value our beliefs and theological knowledge over a living relationship with you and your Spirit, quiet our minds and renew us with your presence. May we seek your presence today and learn to embody the teachings of Scripture as your body in the world. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

## **8 HEROD AND PILATE**

**MATTHEW 2:1-16; LUKE 13; 23:1-15**

### **SUMMARY**

Herod the Great and Pontius Pilate are at least understandable characters in light of their times. Herod fought to bring unruly and violent factions together under his kingdom, and he regularly faced the prospect of a revolt. Not much changed by the time Pilate hit the scene, and he imitated Herod's brutal rule, fueled by a hatred of the Jewish people. The power of Jesus to "rule" as king by "giving away life" stands in stark contrast to the power of Herod and Pilate who ruled by taking away life. By comparing the ways of Jesus to the likes of Pilate and Herod, we have a striking contrast in how to handle power, influence, and authority.

### **DISCUSSION STARTERS**

How did Herod try to bring peace and stability?

How did Jesus use his power and authority in contrast to Pilate and Herod?

What message did Jesus' death on the cross send in light of its symbolism at the time?

What did Jesus teach about the relationship of service to power?

How does this story represent the temptations we face when it comes to using power and influence?

What kind of power has Jesus left his followers?

How is God calling you to use your power and influence?

### **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus Christ, when we misuse or overlook our power, expose our selfishness and lack of confidence in you. Ground us in your strength and reveal ways we can serve our neighbors today. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

## **9 CAIAPHAS**

**JOHN 11:45-57**

### **SUMMARY**

Caiaphas stands out as the “greatest” of all biblical villains. Is there anything that Christians can learn from his story? While the actions of Caiaphas certainly put him in a class all his own, he has much to teach us about the ways compromises can catch up on us. As a cold pragmatist, Caiaphas relied on his own wisdom to save Israel from the Romans, even if it meant turning a blind eye to a number of serious sins. Caiaphas was an expert in majoring in the minors and minoring in the majors. It’s unlikely that Caiaphas started his rule as high priest with an intention of murdering the innocent. However, after a series of compromises, he had set an inevitable course of destruction for himself.

### **DISCUSSION STARTERS**

What is the origin story of Caiaphas?

In what ways can you relate to Caiaphas and what he tried to do?

What was Caiaphas trying to do by plotting Jesus’ murder?

How did Jesus represent a catch-22 for Caiaphas and the other religious leaders?

What warnings does Caiaphas offer people of faith today?

What does the Caiaphas story teach us about the power of God?

### **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus Christ, when we doubt your power and rely on our own wisdom, forgive and restore us. May we begin anew tomorrow with our hope firmly fixed in your power. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

# **10 THE EMMAUS DISCIPLES**

**LUKE 24:13-35**

## **SUMMARY**

With the death of Jesus, their world came crashing down around them. Their hope for the future became a mirage, as the brutality of their rulers and the Roman authorities became fully manifested. They had nothing left, and fearing for their lives, they ran from Jerusalem and sought protection in Emmaus. While the rest of the disciples gathered together in an upper room, these disciples weren't going to risk their lives. However, even after they turned their back on Jesus and stopped believing in his message, all wasn't lost. God wasn't done with them. They still had one last chance to find hope.

## **DISCUSSION STARTERS**

How have doubts impacted your faith?

Why do you think these two disciples fled Jerusalem for Emmaus?

Why did Jesus wait to reveal himself until the meal?

What does this story suggest about restoring those who doubt?

## **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus Christ, when we lose hope and turn away from you, remind us that you are walking alongside us. Forgive our unbelief and give us eyes to see the ways you are working among us. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, we pray. Amen.