

# not a fan

daily devotional

75 DAYS TO BECOMING A COMPLETELY  
COMMITTED FOLLOWER OF JESUS

kyle idleman

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*Not a Fan Daily Devotional*

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# the most important question

Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”

—*Matthew 16:24–25*

**A**re you a follower of Jesus?  
It’s the most important question you will ever answer, and it seems like a good place to begin this journey: Are you a follower of Jesus?

I know. You’ve been asked this question before. Because it’s so familiar there is a tendency to dismiss it. Not because it makes you uncomfortable. Not because it’s especially convicting. The question is dismissed mostly because it feels redundant and unnecessary. You recognize that this is an important question for many to consider, but for you? Well, it’s like walking into a Boston pub and asking, “Who cheers for the Red Sox?” It’s an important question, but you’re so sure of your answer, your mind quickly dismisses it. But before you move on too quickly, let me clarify what I am

not asking. I am not asking if you go to church or if your parents and grandparents are Christians. I am not asking if you raised your hand at the end of a sermon or repeated a prayer after a preacher. I am not asking if you spent your summers at VBS and/or church camp, have ever worn “witness wear,” or understand phrases like “traveling mercies” and “sword drill.”

Many of us are quick to say, “Yes, I’m a follower of Jesus,” but I’m not sure we really understand what we are saying. One of the most sobering passages in the Bible tells of a day when many who consider themselves to be followers of Jesus will be stunned to find out that he doesn’t even recognize them. Jesus describes a day when everyone who has ever lived will stand before God. On that day many who call themselves Christians and identify themselves as followers will stand confidently in front of Jesus only to hear him say, “I never knew you. Away from me.” To be clear, that’s not my opinion or my interpretation; that is what Jesus has said will happen. Read Matthew 7:21–23.

Whether you’ve just assumed you are a follower of Jesus or are faithfully walking with him, I pray this devotional journey will encourage you along the way as you reaffirm your commitment to follow him not perfectly but wholeheartedly. And remember we are invited to follow by the grace of God, and it is his grace that will give us the power we need along the way.

the most important question

## **following today**

Recall that time you first decided to follow Jesus. Where were you? What prompted you to respond? What, if anything, changed about you in those first days and weeks? Write down your answers to these questions: Are you a follower of Jesus? Are you currently living out that decision?

# jesus is not a t-ball coach

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

—*Matthew 7:13–14*

Early on in my preaching and teaching, I tried to talk people into following Jesus by portraying discipleship as appealing, comfortable, and convenient. My intentions were good, but my interpretation was bad.

One of the reasons I wrote the book *Not a Fan* was to consider how Jesus defined what it means to follow him, to be more than just a fan of his. It’s also why I keep looking for new ways to encourage people to seek Jesus daily, instead of waiting for someone, even a pastor like me, to spoon-feed them. Most of our praying should involve sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to his strong words with a humble heart and open eyes.

I really hope that when you picked up this book, you weren’t looking for a book about Jesus the T-ball coach, who will pat you on the head at the end of each game and tell you not to forget your free snow cone before you go home.

When Jesus described the life of a follower, he described a risky adventure down a narrow and difficult path that only a relatively few will take. The Jesus I know and preach about is unsettling. He is countercultural in an uncool way. And he loves you so much that he tells you the truth even when it is hard to hear. It's *because* he loves you that he talks more about repentance than forgiveness, more about surrender than salvation, more about sacrifice than happiness, and more about death than life. Following Jesus is anything but easy. When we read in the Gospels about Jesus' inviting people to follow him, we see that some people signed up, but many decided to take the easy way out and walk away.

So how about you: Are you ready to follow this Jesus? It is the road less traveled, but it's not a road we walk alone. He is with us every step of the way, giving us exactly the grace and the strength we need as we follow hard after him.

### following today

Describe some ways in which it is hard for you to follow Jesus today. Write down a truth, lesson, or teaching of Jesus that is especially difficult for you to act on. How is Jesus specifically challenging you to follow him in a more uncomfortable way?

## DAY 3

# diy

“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”

—*John 14:16–17*

In the 1950s, resourceful homeowners began to call themselves do-it-yourselfers. Instead of paying someone to remodel the kitchen or build a new doghouse, they hammered the nails themselves. With good American efficiency, the phrase “do it yourself” soon morphed into “DIY,” and these days we have everything from DIY cheesecake baking to DIY music making. Entire television shows are based on the concept of doing it yourself. There’s even a DIY Network and a *DIY* magazine. With the help of the internet, people can draft their own legal documents, appraise their own antiques, and even get a DIY divorce.

This do-it-yourself mentality didn’t start with enterprising Americans, however. It’s really nothing new, going all the way back to the Garden. “You can do it yourself, Eve. You’re a smart woman.” “You don’t need God, Adam.

You can be just like God.” And DIY became part of the human DNA.

But Jesus came to change that. God knew we needed a savior, that we couldn't save ourselves. We can't even begin following Jesus by ourselves. Jesus made this clear: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them” (John 6:44). And because we need saving help every day, he sent his Spirit to live in the hearts of his people. We were never meant to follow Jesus simply by trying really hard or striving on our own. The Christian journey isn't a DIY project.

Don't buy into the ancient lie. You can't do it yourself. And here's the really good news for Jesus followers: You don't have to.

### **following today**

What's your biggest unsolved problem today, large or small? Describe ways that you have tried to take care of it yourself. Stop to pray a minute. Ask the Holy Spirit (who lives in you) to bring insight and strength.

# knowledge versus intimacy

I want to know Christ.

—*Philippians 3:10*

In the Bible, we read about a group of religious leaders known as the Pharisees. The Pharisees knew a lot about God. When someone wanted to play Bible Trivial Pursuit, Godopoly, or Bible Baseball, they were the team to beat. They knew *about* God, but what we discover is they really didn't know him. It's the difference between knowledge and intimacy.

In Matthew 15:8 Jesus describes the Pharisees this way: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

That description seems to fit a lot of fans I know. Churches are full of people who go to Bible studies about Jesus, complete with workbooks and homework. Many preachers refer to their sermons as lessons or lectures, accompanied by outlines where church members can take notes and fill in the blanks. I spent a number of years growing up confusing my knowledge about Jesus for intimacy with Jesus. For example, for as long as I can remember I've had the books of the Bible memorized in order—all sixty-six of them. Not

only that, but I can actually say the books of the Bible in one breath. Don't try to act like you're not impressed.

Having knowledge is not the problem. But when you have knowledge without intimacy, you're not *really* following Jesus. Like the Pharisees, many people could describe everything they know *about* Jesus. The truth, though, is that Jesus is not impressed by your knowledge or by my talent. What he really desires is our hearts.

### following today

Tell Jesus that you want to *know* him, not just know *about* him. Do some honest self-evaluation: Have you spent more time learning about God than learning to fall in love with him? Consider reading through the Gospel of John in the next twenty-one days (just one chapter each day), simply focusing on getting to know Jesus.

# the only thing on the menu

Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

—*John 6:35*

Sometimes big moments can cause big problems.

- The actor’s mind goes blank at the moment of his big line.
- The singer is forced to mouth “watermelon” as she forgets the words of her song.
- The NBA player air-balls a free throw at a clutch moment.
- The bride can’t stop giggling through the entire ceremony. Or crying. Or some really awkward combination of both. (Thankfully, my wife did neither.)
- The preacher calls the groom by the wrong name. (I may or may not have done this. Twice.)

Maybe you’ve witnessed one of these scenarios. Maybe you’ve found yourself in one.

I was about to have a big problem at a big moment several years ago. It was Thursday afternoon, and I was struggling to decide what sermon to preach on Easter Sunday. More than thirty thousand people would likely be coming to the weekend services, and the pressure was mounting. Finally, this thought crossed my mind: *I wonder what Jesus taught whenever he had the big crowds. I wonder how he handled the big moments.*

John 6 tells us of one such occasion. With a boy's sack lunch of five loaves of bread and two small fish, Jesus feeds a crowd that likely has grown to more than five thousand. He has never been more popular. After dinner the crowd decides to camp out for the night so they can be with Jesus the next day. But the next morning when the crowd wakes up hungry and looks around for Jesus, aka their meal ticket, he is nowhere to be found. Starving, the crowd is hoping for an encore performance, but Jesus has decided to shut down the all-you-can-eat buffet. In John 6:26 Jesus says to the crowd: "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill."

Then Jesus offers the hungry crowd *himself*. The question is, Would that be enough? Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." Suddenly Jesus is the only thing on the menu. The crowd has to decide if he will satisfy or if they are hungry for something more. Here's what we read at the end of the

## 25 days of following

chapter: “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (John 6:66).

You see, it wasn't the size of the crowd Jesus cared about; it was their level of commitment.

### **following today**

In your prayers, what do you usually ask Jesus for? Think of a time when he didn't answer your prayer the way you had hoped. How did that affect how you felt about him? Read the rest of this story in John 6. Think of a time when it felt like Jesus was all you had. How did he meet your needs during that time?

## the new rabbi

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

—*Matthew 9:9*

Matthew the tax collector used to be Levi the good Jewish boy. It's likely that he tried to become a disciple of one of the rabbis. Perhaps he was even expected to become a spiritual leader in Israel. But something had definitely gone wrong. Instead of serving the Lord, he decided to serve himself. He turned his back on his own people and became a tax collector for the occupying Roman government. And in those days, there was no such thing as an honest tax collector. They cheated the people to line their own pockets. They were religious and social outcasts, ceremonially unclean, and not even allowed into the outer court of the temple.

Matthew could never imagine that God would still want anything to do with him. Then one day when he was sitting at his tax-collecting booth, a new rabbi came right up to him, extending this simple, life-changing invitation: "Follow me."

Jesus may have been a homeless, unconventional rabbi, but he was a rabbi nonetheless. Rabbis were teachers of

God's Word, and every rabbi had a class of students, or disciples. But this was an exclusive group; not just anyone could be a disciple. Disciples had to earn their way into the rabbi's graces, proving that they possessed an impressive knowledge of Scripture as well as brilliant minds. The rabbi's reputation depended on accepting only the most highly qualified candidates.

But this wasn't the way Rabbi Jesus went about getting followers. Instead of followers applying, Jesus *invited* followers. And in this case, he was inviting the lowest of the low—a tax collector. Someone who was not only a sinner, but who sinned for a living! Someone whose friends were prostitutes, drunkards, and thieves. You know how we know this about Matthew? Because he tells us himself.

These days, people don't know Matthew as a failure and embarrassment who had sold his soul to the Romans for a lucrative job. We know him as a follower of Jesus who wrote the first book of the New Testament.

### following today

Have you ever felt disqualified from being accepted by God? How? When did you hear Jesus' invitation for you to follow him? What did you leave in order to respond to that invitation?

## simple, but not easy

[Jesus] said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

—*Luke 5:4–5*

There’s no reason to think that Simon Peter’s response to Jesus was sarcastic, but you have to wonder if he was thinking, *Yeah, right. That carpenter-rabbi thinks he can tell a fisherman how to fish?* But what did he have to lose at this point? So as he squinted in the sunlight glinting off the Sea of Galilee, he flung his soaked net overboard one more time.

I’m not sure where those fish had been hiding all night, but this time they swarmed into his net as soon as it hit the water. Simon Peter had never had such a wasted night, and now he had never hauled in a catch like this, in broad daylight. What Jesus suggested wasn’t difficult or complicated; it just didn’t make any sense. Practically speaking, it seemed like a waste of time. It went against Peter’s extensive experience and intuition. Jesus gave no fresh explanation. His directions weren’t innovative or creative. Yet Simon Peter simply obeyed.

## 25 days of following

Sometimes following Jesus is simple, but that doesn't mean it's always easy. Humble obedience to what God has called us to may be as simple as making a phone call, extending an invitation, or walking across the street. Maybe it carries a greater challenge, like extending forgiveness to someone who has hurt you, or moving to a foreign mission field, or trusting him by tithing. But when God asks us to do something that seems impractical or inconvenient—maybe especially when it does—it brings abundant reward.

Notice that God will let you voice your objections. So, if that makes you feel better, he's okay with it. Just remember that the one telling you where to fish is the one who created the fish.

### following today

Take a few minutes to read the rest of this story from Luke 5. Prayerfully consider something simple, but not necessarily easy, that Jesus is asking of you today as you follow him. Complete this sentence: "Lord, because you say so, I will . . ."

## god stories worth telling

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

—*Ephesians 2:8–9*

As a pastor and a writer, I really get into hearing people's God stories. Often it is my privilege to hear somebody's story firsthand in my office, or in the moments immediately following a weekend service at our church. Many of the stories are the Christian equivalent of rags to riches: Having been thrown out onto the trash heap of life, a person finds Jesus (or rather Jesus finds the person) and everything changes.

These are the kinds of stories that get retold. The details capture our attention: "I remember the day my husband left me, and I was suddenly a single mom with no job." "I cried for days after I got the diagnosis." "Then the stock market crashed and I lost everything."

The outcomes bring glory to God: "My faith community surrounded me in a way my family never had." "I never would have guessed how much God would teach me through the months of chemotherapy and hospital visits." "I learned firsthand that God will supply every need."

## 25 days of following

Maybe you don't have that kind of dramatic story. The details might seem fairly mundane and ho-hum. You may appreciate it, but other people might not observe much amazing about it. Maybe your story wouldn't make the cut when the book of incredible testimonies is being compiled. But you still have a story worth telling. You have been saved by grace, through faith.

### **following today**

Think about your personal God story. Does it seem revolutionary—or boring? Jot down a chronological outline of it. Try to remember the “mile marker” kind of moments where you put a stake in the ground or turned to go a new direction. Indicate those times when you clearly saw the hand of God at work, providing or guiding.

## glory in suffering

We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

—Romans 5:3–4

Most of us don't do suffering very well. We skim right over the word in Scripture, having bought into the false idea that once a person becomes a Christian, everything should be smooth sailing from that point on. We'd prefer to think that suffering is for other people.

It's true that you do see plenty of suffering wherever you go. A simple walk through your neighborhood turns up some: Through an open window, you hear a husband and wife yelling at each other. You find out that your neighbor across the street just got a foreclosure notice. The weedy yard of the elderly couple on the corner tells you that the husband has died and his wife is now in a nursing home. The middle school student constantly on your doorstep has no desire to return to his abusive home.

But when *you* are the one with marital or financial or health problems, suddenly you want to call, "Time out! This isn't how it's supposed to be. I'm on God's team, and he's

supposed to make everything right.” You run to the nearest marital, financial, or health expert so they can supply you with a quick solution. “Dear God, suffering hurts too much!”

Have you picked up your Bible lately? It’s right there in black and white: “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). The point isn’t to elude problems and suffering, but to grow and learn from them. As the apostle Paul came to understand, we can actually “glory” in our sufferings, because they produce an abundant harvest—perseverance, character, and hope.

You *are* on God’s team, and he *is* making everything right. Remember that this valley you are walking through is only a shadow, and where there is a shadow, there is a light. So keep on walking. Keep following. Because Jesus, too, knows what it means to suffer. And he is walking right beside you.

## following today

Read the beautiful and familiar Twenty-Third Psalm. It’s only six verses, so read it slowly, more than once, maybe even out loud. As you do, make two distinct lists: In one column, list the verbs that indicate what *you* do (the word *walk* will come up, for example). In a second column, list the things that God does. Thank him for his faithful goodness, comfort, and mercy.

# desperate

Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me.

—*Psalm 142:6*

Several years ago, when my second daughter, Morgan, was about two years old, I arrived home from my church office early one afternoon. I was eager to spend a little extra time with my young daughter. My wife informed me that Morgan had been sleeping for a while, but gave me the green light to go upstairs and wake her from her nap. I opened the door to her room and quickly noticed two things: First, her dresser had toppled over on the floor and made quite a mess—an obvious, but not necessarily alarming, observation. Second, I noticed that Morgan was not in her bed. Again, easily apparent, but not especially concerning. Until I connected this second fact to the first. In only a few seconds, I realized what had happened. In an attempt to reach something on top of her tall dresser, Morgan had pulled out the lower drawers and started climbing when the entire dresser crashed over on her small body.

I struggled to lift the heavy furniture up as quickly as

possible. Underneath, my daughter was lying still, her body already severely bruised and swollen. I called out for my wife to get in the car, scooped up my unresponsive little girl, and we began speeding to the hospital. My wife sat with our daughter in the back seat and immediately began praying.

While she was praying, I was dialing 911 and there was no answer. To this day, it is the only time I have ever *needed* to dial that number, and the phone simply rang and rang. I hung up and dialed again. Still no response. So I threw the phone in the passenger's seat and joined my wife in her out-loud prayers. Not just any prayers, but passionate, anxious, emotion-filled prayers. Prayers of desperation. Prayers through tears.

The good news is after a number of months Morgan made a full recovery, but I'll never forget the feeling of desperation as I called out to God. Have you ever found yourself in that kind of moment? The time when you had no idea how you would pay the mounting medical bills. The day you came home and found the note from your runaway child. The night your husband stormed out of the house. The appointment where you learned it was cancer. The officer at your door with a bowed head and a tragic report. The silent ultrasound. The joyless marriage. Your first Christmas without her.

Here's what I hope you'll realize: In your moments of greatest desperation, you'll discover that you can depend on Jesus. Desperation fosters dependence. So run to him.

desperate

Cry out for him. You'll find a friend who sticks closer than a brother. You'll experience a peace that surpasses your understanding. You'll climb into a strong refuge and a safe hiding place. You'll get to know him as *Immanuel*, "God with you." And you'll learn that he can be depended on when you need him the most.

### following today

Read Psalm 88. What words of the psalmist can you identify with? Recall a desperate moment or season in your life. Where did you run for help? Write out several lines of a prayer that begin with this phrase: "I need you to help me with . . ."

## when sunday school answers aren't enough

What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. . . . I want to know Christ.

—*Philippians 3:8, 10*

Several years ago, I listened as a minister friend of mine described a season in his life when he began to question just about everything he had always known about God. My friend had gone through a particularly difficult experience with one of his children, and it proved to be more than just a speed bump in his spiritual journey.

The conversation was more of a monologue than a dialogue. I listened as he vented, and his thought progression was honestly hard to hear. He questioned aloud whether God really worked in all things for good. He struggled believing that a good God would allow something so terrible to happen. He wondered if God wasn't so quick to forgive after all, instead thinking that perhaps God was a vengeful and wrathful God, punishing the child for the past sins of the father. He thought perhaps he had been living a

lie all along and doubted he could ever be truly secure in his salvation. And then he summed up his thoughts: “I’ve heard all those things my whole life; I guess I just got to the point where all the Sunday school answers weren’t enough.”

I’ll be honest. It was one of those moments when I couldn’t manufacture a great pastoral response. After all, what right answer could I give him that wouldn’t sound trite or rehearsed? What could I tell him that he hadn’t heard—and even preached—for years? He had grown up in church. He was a third-generation minister. By this point in his life, he had spent nearly two decades teaching biblical truth to literally thousands of people. But I couldn’t help but wonder—maybe his problem was that he grew up knowing the right answers but never really got to know *Jesus*.

The apostle Paul knew all the right answers—he was a well-trained Pharisee and teacher of the law. He had the right lineage, preached the right sermons, and lived the right way. He knew the right people and had the right testimony. But he also had the right perspective: All those right answers and actions proved “worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8 NLT). And he had the right desire: “I want to know Christ” (Phil. 3:10).

By the way (and this might go without saying), it’s not that the Sunday school answers aren’t true. It’s just that they pale in comparison with knowing the one who said, “*I am* the truth.”

## **following today**

Can you identify with this minister's doubts? Think of a time in your own life when you questioned beliefs that you had long held to be true. Is it possible you have spent more time learning the right answers than getting to know Jesus? Pray today that Jesus would reveal himself even more clearly to you as you read his Word.

## another wipeout

“You will know that I am the LORD; those who hope in me will not be disappointed.”

—*Isaiah 49:23*

Several years ago, I was vacationing with my family at a Tennessee resort. My parents were there, as were both of my sisters and their husbands, as my dad had generously paid the expenses for his three adult children and our spouses to all spend the week together. One sunny afternoon, my two brothers-in-law and I decided to rent bicycles and go for a ride. We picked the bikes up from the clubhouse and set out.

Two important details: (1) At the time, all three of us were in our twenties, so we had plenty of energy to expend. And (2) all three of us are naturally pretty competitive, so we weren't planning a slow, recreational ride.

We were speeding down the first hill—I was in the lead, not that it matters—and preparing to navigate a sharp left turn. I squeezed the handlebar to slow down and suddenly realized what I had somehow failed to notice up to this point: These bikes were not equipped with hand brakes. I had a split-second decision to make: Ride the bike over the curb into the wooded drop-off beyond, or dismount as

quickly as possible. (In retrospect, I know I could have used the pedal brake, but this thought didn't occur to me in that moment.) I decided to bail, sending the bike crashing into the trees ahead as I tumbled onto the asphalt below. Even now I can picture the concerned response from my brothers-in-law behind me: clutching their sides, doubled over in laughter, never bothering to ask if I was actually okay.

You've had your share of wipeouts too. You were expecting smooth sailing, but a storm came up. You worked like a maniac to navigate the roadblocks, and you crashed into them instead. You tried to slam on the brakes, but only accelerated into disaster. You were following your dreams, and they turned out to be rabbit trails. Fired from your job. Served with divorce papers. Flunked out of college. Drowning in debt.

Wipeout. Failure. Disappointment. And it's not just situational, but relational too. You reached out for a helping hand only to find pointed fingers. You searched nearby faces for empathy or grace, and instead found ridicule and judgment. Your trust was returned with betrayal, your kindness repaid in abuse.

But God can redeem our failure. He can rescue us when we fall. Those who hope in him will not be disappointed. Those who turn to him find grace and mercy when they need it the most (see Heb. 4:16). When we are humbled, he lifts us up with his strong hand (1 Peter 5:6). And when we fall, he doesn't rebuke, but proves himself mighty to save (Zeph. 3:17).

## following today

How were you disappointed most recently? It's not too late to let your personal failure or disappointment point you to God. Write out a prayer—a personal psalm of sorts—expressing your trust in him to turn your defeat into hope. Expect him to come through.