

Walk in Newness of Life

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, June 21, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Matthew 10:34-39](#) and [Romans 6:1-11](#)

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At some point in my spiritual journey, probably in high school or college, I had a little debate with myself. If God loves everyone, including me, and forgives all our sins, then our behavior doesn't really matter. More importantly, *my* behavior doesn't really matter. I can just go on sinning and trust that God will forgive me. It's not that I had anything particular in mind that I wanted to do. I was just trying to make sense of grace. I was just trying to make sense of the notion that God's love and forgiveness is given not because I deserve it, but because God chooses it.

"This is exactly the type of thinking that Paul is arguing against in chapter 6 of his letter to the Romans. Paul is concerned that Christ's followers will misunderstand grace in a way that encourages sin,"¹ much the way my adolescent mind was misunderstanding grace.

"More sin equals more grace. Instead, Paul wants his readers to understand that through baptism and our mystical union with Christ, we are dead to sin. Sin no longer has dominion over us; only Christ has dominion over us. Therefore, we should live as Christ modeled and taught.

"In other words, grace is not permission to keep living however we please. Grace is the power by which God transforms us into people who live like Christ."²

Paul is famous for being an extraordinarily good evangelist. He did a great job of bringing people to profess a faith in Jesus and choose to be Jesus' followers. I think Paul's effectiveness came from his own experience of grace.

We're introduced to Paul at the end of chapter 7 of the Book of Acts. Chapters 6 and 7 tell the story of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Chapter 6 tells about the arrest of Stephen. Most of chapter 7 is Stephen's testimony in his trial. He's found guilty of blasphemy and brought outside the city to be stoned to death. There's one line in the story that says the people who stoned Stephen laid their coats at the feet of a man named Saul. That's it. That's our introduction to Paul, who at that time went by his Hebrew name Saul.

Saul reappears in chapter 9. He's on a mission to arrest and bring back to Jerusalem anyone who "belonged to the Way" (Acts 9:2), that is anyone who is a follower of Jesus. In a flash of light while he was on the road to Damascus, Saul is confronted by a disembodied voice who claims to be Jesus. After experiencing blindness for several days because of this experience, a man named Ananias came to heal Saul. In response to this experience – on the road and the healing with Ananias – Saul is baptized and becomes that zealous evangelist to the Gentiles.

¹ Trice Gibbons, "June 21; 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time," *The Christian Century*, June 2026 edition, page 26.

² *Ibid.*

His experience of grace, of Jesus coming to Paul on the road to Damascus and helping him see the cruelty of what he was doing while not smiting him, led Paul to desperately want others to know about that grace. He had been smiting followers of Jesus, and Jesus confronted him with grace, not smiting. And Paul was transformed. He experienced grace as the power by which God transformed him into someone who lived like Christ.

As I read his promotion of grace, I wondered if Paul forgot how dangerous following Jesus could be. We heard in the introduction to the gospel lesson that in this chapter in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is speaking to the twelve disciples, giving them instructions before sending them out to "Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons."

There are plenty of scholars who doubt that these are authentically words spoken by the historical Jesus. They argue that these words are more likely placed on the lips of Jesus by the early church.³ They point out that the idea of Jesus deliberately creating conflict contradicts other sayings of Jesus in which he recommends unqualified love, for instance, in the Sermon on the Mount. Furthermore, in Matthew's narrative, Jesus hasn't revealed to his disciples that he will be killed by the principalities and powers. That doesn't happen for another 6 chapters. So the line about taking up your cross and following him is anachronistic. It is more likely to come from the perspective of the early Christian community at a time when persecution and martyrdom were real possibilities.

If these scholars are right, that doesn't mean we should ignore these instructions. If these instructions are a glimpse into how the early church saw following Jesus, they are instructive. If you read the whole chapter, the whole set of instructions, you'll notice that "Jesus sends the disciples out in a way that underscores their vulnerability: he tells them to bring no money, no bag, no extra clothes, no sandals, no staff (Matthew 10:9-10). This puts them at the mercy of the hospitality – or hostility – of the people they encounter along the way, and in this week's reading, Jesus both encourages the disciples and warns them that adversity awaits."⁴

On one hand, we hear Jesus saying, "Don't be afraid; God knows you and loves you better than you know and love yourself, and will be with you all the way along." On the other hand, Jesus implies that "their coming adventures will require courage. They will encounter opponents, hostility, threats – even persecution. The powers that be, the death-dealing forces in the world, will not quietly step aside. This is work that will require resolve and perseverance: part-timers need not apply. You've got to go all in, or not go at all.

"Following Jesus, in other words, isn't for the faint of heart. It means giving things up, even precious things, even things we hold dear."⁵

³ Robert W. Funk, *et al*, *The Five Gospels: the Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), 173-175.

⁴ "What Troubles You?" *Salt Project*, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/6/17/what-troubles-you-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-third-week-after-pentecost> (posted 15 June 2026; accessed 16 June 2026).

⁵ *Ibid*.

The early church is discovering some things about following Jesus. Following Jesus require us to embrace an unconventional life of intense, generous commitment to God's mission. It calls us to lose our life in order to find it. I think they had found in their own lives that following Jesus means making God's mission of love and justice the first priority in their lives, even above family and livelihood. Following Jesus means being willing to get into good trouble by confronting and even entering into conflict with the death-dealing powers of the day.

Maybe I should have preached this sermon before the baptism today, because this this understanding of following Jesus, this understanding of discipleship means leaving behind conventional approaches to kinship, career, and social harmony. As one commentary concluded, "The good news of the Gospel may be for everyone – but discipleship isn't."⁶

To be honest, I'm not very happy with that conclusion: that discipleship isn't for everyone. I typically think that anyone can become a disciple and that the more disciples there are, the faster we'll bring heaven to earth. The second part may be right, that the more disciples there are the faster we'll bring heaven to earth. The first part, however ...

While Jesus does say, "Follow me," a whole bunch of times, he doesn't say it to everyone. He clearly says it to the men he calls to be his disciples – and I suspect he said it to some women, too. But consider this: Jesus encountered thousands of people during his ministry, and he only called a few handfuls his disciples. And here in chapter 10 of Matthew's gospel, he doesn't send those disciples out to recruit and expand their ranks. He sends them to "Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons." He sends them out to heal and liberate and proclaim that "the reign of God has come near."

Likewise, Jesus and his entourage moved through the countryside feeding, healing, and teaching the crowds, but not signing them up as disciples. For the overwhelming majority of the people he met, his signature sign-off wasn't "Follow me." It was much more common for him to say: "Your faith has made you well," or "Return home and declare how much God has done for you," or "Go on your way, and sin no more," or "Go in peace," or even "Don't tell anyone about this."

The Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor might be right, that most of us are less like "disciples" and more like "friends of the disciples."⁷ "Disciple-adjacent," I might say. Maybe most we are too beholden to conventional priorities of kinship and livelihood. Even if that's true, we who are baptized are still "buried with [Jesus] by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might *walk in newness of life*." We can live lives where sin no longer has dominion over us; only Christ has dominion over us.

And who knows? Jesus may yet have more adventures in mind for us. Jesus just may say, "Follow me a little more closely. Let go of the conventional priorities of kinship and

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Friends of the Disciples," *Preaching in the New Millennium: Celebrating the Tercentennial of Yale University* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 76-86.

livelihood.” In ways large and small, there’s no telling what kind of follower of Jesus we may yet become.

Amen.