

Practicing the Way

Be with Jesus
Become like him
Do as he did

**John Mark
Comer**

New York Times bestselling author of
The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry

Praise for Practicing the Way

"In this spacious, eminently readable volume, John Mark Comer meditates on how Christian discipleship is, at its root, the radical task of becoming an apprentice of Jesus—to be with him, to become like him, and to do as he did. The deceptively simple call is to take Jesus at his word, to open ourselves fully to him, to organize our schedules, our routines, our study, our daily practices around him, and, by doing so, to become people who can do as he would in our day and our culture. Comer's experiences as a pastor, teacher, thinker, and an apprentice himself are helpfully on display here. Sit with this book slowly and let it be your guide into a life of apprenticeship to Jesus."

—Tish Harrison Warren, Anglican priest and author of *Liturgy of the Ordinary* and *Prayer in the Night*

"I love John Mark Comer's vision for life—to be with Jesus, become more like him, and aspire to do what Jesus would do. This book can help us all in our own walk with Jesus."

—Nicky Gumbel, pioneer of Alpha

"In *Practicing the Way*, John Mark Comer brilliantly shows us what it means to follow Jesus, and here is the best part: As you read, you will want nothing more than to be on Jesus' heels. We are a disciple-less generation, and yet, walking this closely with Jesus is our way back to the purpose of life. This is one of the most important books I have read in a decade, and if we would all follow in this way, our lives would change and the world would change."

—Jennie Allen, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Get Out of Your Head* and *Find Your People* and founder and visionary of IF:Gathering

"In *Practicing the Way*, John Mark Comer offers us a portrait of following Jesus that is as profound and compelling as it is simple. Be prepared to take an honest look at your own life habits and prayerfully ask, *What kind of person am I becoming and Is it more like Jesus or less?* Here you will find a beautiful picture of the kind of life Jesus envisioned for his followers and a practical pathway to experience it for yourself."

—Tim Mackie, co-founder of BibleProject

"This is the book that I want everyone in my church to read. It is an invitation deeper for the lifelong follower of Jesus, and the perfect primer for the new believer. Somehow, in a way only John Mark can do, he has plunged the depths of the gospel invitation in a way that is relatable, accessible, and readable for the everyday seeker."

—Tyler Staton, lead pastor of Bridgetown Church

“This book presents Jesus as not merely someone we interpret but as a timeless teacher who interprets us. Our world of imminent distractions and luring cultural traps robs us of a basic soul satisfaction. In what is sure to be a classic, John Mark Comer takes us back to the future. Learning from the desert fathers but spoken like a timely sage, John Mark explains the abundant life to a generation divested of its virtue and void of its principle. Herein is a window to the meaning and significance of life that only Jesus affords. John Mark has given us the antidote to failed religion and generational hypocrisy. Read it slowly. Be changed deeply.”

—Rev. Dr. Charlie Dates, senior pastor of Salem Baptist Church of Chicago and Progressive Baptist Church, Chicago

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"Come, follow me."

—Jesus, Mark 1v17

"May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi."
—first-century Jewish blessing

Dust

Who are you following?

Everybody is following *somebody*—or at least something.

Put another way, we're all disciples.

The question isn't, Am I a disciple?

It's, *Who* or *what* am I a disciple *of*?

I know, I know; what I just said is akin to heresy in the modern world. We want so badly to believe that we—and we alone—plot our course, captain our ship, control our destiny. We aspire to lead, not to follow.

But, question: How is that working out for you?

Do you ever feel that nagging “thought” tug at the back of your mind: *Is the life I'm living the life I most deeply desire? Is this it?*

I was born and raised on the West Coast of America. It's an open secret that the US in general and my home state of California in particular are built on what sociologists call “the myth of the rugged individual.” Dr. Robert Bellah called it “radical individualism” and said it's the defining trait of America.^[1]

And yet “no man is an island,” as the poet John Donne once said.^[2] And no woman is either. In the words of the *New York Times* columnist Tish

Harrison Warren, “None of us comes to what we believe by ourselves. *The world has no free thinkers.*”^[3]

(You see, I’m not the only cultural heretic around...)

Powerful forces have a vested interest in our believing the myth (and it *is* a myth) that we are following no one at all. Many of the cultural liturgies that indoctrinate us daily—“Be true to yourself,” “You do you,” “Speak your truth”—can be traced back to sources with a nefarious agenda.^[4] If “they” (whether multinational corporations, politicians, anti-democratic government agents, marketing departments, influencers who just want more followers, etc., etc.) can make us believe that each person is a blank slate, just following the inner compass of our “authentic self” in an upward march to happiness, then they can keep us blind to all the ways we’ve been “disciplined”—formed and manipulated—by *their* desires.

Any skilled con artist knows the key to deceiving your mark is to get them to believe your scheme was *their* idea. Translation: The key to getting people to follow you is to convince them they aren’t following anyone at all.

With the rise of social media empires and their spooky digital algorithms, these powerful forces now have direct access to our flows of consciousness every time we slide our thumbs across our phones. What we are led to believe are just ads, news links, retweets, and random digital flotsam are, in reality, mass behavior modification techniques intentionally designed to influence how we think, feel, believe, shop, vote, and live. To quote the tech philosopher Jaron Lanier, “What might once have been called advertising must now be understood as continuous behavior modification on a titanic scale.”^[5] The “world” (as it’s called in the New Testament) is *forming* us, constantly.

But what is it forming us *into*?

Because we are each becoming something. That's the crux of the human experience: the process of becoming a person. To be human is to change. To grow. To evolve. This is by God's design.

The question is not, Am I becoming a person?

It's, *Who* or *what* am I becoming?

If you plot the trajectory of your life over the next five decades and envision yourself at seventy, eighty, or a hundred, what kind of person do you see on the horizon? Does the projection in your mind fill you with hope? Or dread?

For those of us who desire to follow Jesus, here is the reality we must turn and face: If we're not being intentionally formed by Jesus himself, then it's highly likely we are being unintentionally formed by someone or something *else*.^[6]

So, again, Who are you following?

The deeper question here is, In whom are you *trusting*? Who (or what) do you put your faith in to show you the way to the life you desire? It's my conviction that contrary to what we hear, living by faith isn't a Christian thing or even a religious thing; it's a *human* thing—we *all* live by faith.

The question isn't, Am I going to believe?

It's, *Who* or *what* am I going to believe *in*?

Meaning, Who or what am I going to *entrust* my life to? Do I really want to trust *myself*—or any other human, for that matter? We creatures who seem to have gotten ourselves into the very mess we're trying to fix?

It's only human to be drawn to someone—a celebrity or guru or historical figure—and to desire to become like them. This is part of how God wired us

to grow. We all have an ideal life we aspire to, and when we find a person or idea system that seems to embody what we want, we “follow” them, we put our trust in them. Or, in more Christian language, we “believe.”

Who do you believe in?^[7] Who is your luminary of choice, the person whose orbit you would give anything to spend a few days living in?

Put another way, Who is your rabbi?

I am one of many people who have found Jesus of Nazareth to be the most radiant light to ever grace the human scene. I’m an avid reader, and through the gift of literature, I have peered inside the minds of some of history’s greatest thinkers. All of them have laudable traits (and some not so laudable ones too). But the longer I live and learn, the more I’m convinced that Jesus has no real competition, ancient or modern. In my estimation, no other thinker, philosopher, leader, philosophy, or ideology has the coherence, sophistication, and deep inner resonance of Jesus and his Way. Much less the staggering *beauty*.

In our secular age, the air we breathe is filled with skepticism, ennui, distrust of all authority, and the bending of truth to desire and feeling. Inside this cultural atmosphere, we are *all* doubting Thomas.

But even on the days when I struggle to believe that Jesus was who he claimed to be (spoiler: more than just a rabbi), I *want* to believe. I *want* Jesus’ vision of life in the kingdom of God to be true. I resonate at a soul level with the disciple Peter’s conclusion:

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.^[8]

I stand (or really, walk) with a vast multitude of others around the world and down through history who have come to believe: *There simply is no better way, truth, or life to be found than that of Jesus.*

Of the myriad of options, he's the one I choose to follow. I'm going to end up following someone, so I choose to follow Jesus.

The philosopher Dallas Willard used to say, "There is no problem in human life that apprenticeship to Jesus cannot solve." Following or, as I will describe it in the pages to come, *apprenticing* Jesus, is the solution to the problem of the so-called human condition. Name your malaise: political polarization, climate change, looming global war, the mental health epidemic, addiction, Christian nationalism, widespread hypocrisy among Christian leaders, our simple inability to be kind...

There is no problem in human life that apprenticeship to Jesus cannot solve.

You may have picked up this book because you're seriously considering becoming a follower of Jesus, but you want to know what it is you're saying yes to. That's wise; Jesus urged potential followers to "count the cost" before becoming his disciples.^[9]

Or you may already be a Christian but find in your heart a growing desire to take your faith more seriously—to become an apprentice of Jesus. To add a new level of intentionality to your spiritual formation. To live on purpose, not on accident.

Or you may be a longtime follower of Jesus but feel like you've hit a plateau. You're stuck, and you ache to get unstuck, to experience a deeper level of healing. To close the gap between your life and Jesus' "life that is truly life."^[10] In other words, you want to become a saint.

Whoever you are and whatever prompted you to read this book, welcome. I'm so happy you've come along.

I am a follower of Jesus who has spent the better part of my adult life working out discipleship to Jesus in the post-Christian West. I have come to believe that there is a Way of life laid down by Jesus himself, and that if we

give ourselves to it—and ultimately to *him*—it will lead to the life we *all* most truly crave.

This book is the culmination of decades of experience, trial and error, more failures than successes, and a lot of lessons learned in the school of hard knocks. But the pages to come are no tome; they are simply an exploration and explanation of what I believe to be three of the most important words ever spoken in the long annals of human history:

Come, follow me.^[11]

Contrary to what many assume, Jesus did not invite people to convert to Christianity. He didn't even call people to become Christians (keep reading...); he invited people to apprentice under him into a whole new way of living. To be transformed.

My thesis is simple: Transformation *is* possible *if* we are willing to arrange our lives around the practices, rhythms, and truths that Jesus himself did, which will open our lives to God's power to change. Said another way, we can be transformed *if* we are willing to apprentice ourselves to Jesus.

Then—and only then—can we become the people we ache to be and live the lives we were destined for.

That said, we hear the language of “following” Jesus all the time. But what exactly does it *mean*?

It means practicing the Way.

Practicing the Way—

Apprentice to Jesus

—

Imagine this: Your name is Simon. You're a first-century Hebrew, likely in your late teens or early twenties. You run a fishing business in the Galilee, a string of villages in the north of Israel. Your life is pretty much mapped out for you. You do what your father did, and his father before him. Living under Roman occupation, there aren't a lot of options. Keep your head down, be quiet, pay your taxes.

One day you're waist deep in water, casting your net alongside your brother, Andrew, when you notice a man walking toward you on the beach. You instantly recognize his face. It's him: *Jesus*, from Nazareth, just a few miles away. Everyone is talking about this man—he is saying and doing things no rabbi has said or done. Ever.

Here he is, walking straight toward you. You make eye contact. His eyes sparkle like stars, like there's a cosmos behind them. He radiates joy, but there's no small talk:

Come, follow me...and I will send you out to fish for people.^[1]

You're absolutely stunned.

It can't be.

Not *you*.

You immediately drop your nets, drag Andrew out of the boat (though he doesn't need any coaxing), leave *everything* behind, and fall in step behind

Jesus, elated to be in his company. Or in the words of the biographer Mark, “At once they left their nets and followed him.”^[2]

Now, if you’re familiar with this story, it’s easy to miss how bizarre it is. What would make Simon literally walk away from a profitable business and leave behind his family and friends, with zero planning, all to follow a man with no income stream, no organization, and no official position into an unknown future? Is this drinking the Kool-Aid before there was Kool-Aid?

Or are we missing something?

Jesus was a rabbi

If you were Simon, and Jesus were to visit your synagogue one fine Sabbath morning to preach, the category you likely would have put him in was that of a rabbi, or teacher.

The title *rabbi* literally means “master.”^[3] Rabbis were the spiritual masters of Israel. Not only were they expert teachers of the Torah (the Scriptures of their day); they were also magnetic examples of life with God—those special few who shine with an inner luminescence.

Every rabbi had his “yoke”—a Hebrew idiom for his set of teachings, his way of reading Scripture, his take on how to thrive as a human being in God’s good world. How you, too, could taste a little of what they’d tasted...

Rabbis came from a broad cross section of society. They could have been farmers or blacksmiths or even carpenters.^[4] Most trained under another rabbi for many years, then began to teach and call their own disciples around the age of thirty. But there was no formal certification like in our modern educational system. Authority worked differently. Your *life* and *teaching* were your credentials.