

# Following Jesus

-Introduction & User Guide-

My name is Rick Lawrence—I'm Executive Director of Vibrant Faith, a ministry resourcing, training, coaching, and research organization founded by Dr. Merton Strommen 25 years ago. For the last eight years I've been leading youth, young adults, and adults in a weekly experience called *Following Jesus*. You could call it a small group (though we typically have 20 or more participants) or a "home church" or a Bible study (though it's not at all like a typical Bible study). No matter what the age or maturity level of the participants, all of them are able to engage with what we're doing.

Here, I've sampled from the almost-300 experiences I've created and collected 40 of them into seven teaching series—the idea is to offer you a whole year of Jesus-themed "pursuits" that will work with any age group, in almost any setting (large-group gathering, small-group gathering, retreat, Sunday morning, or Wednesday night). The series offered in this resource include:

- **Foundations**
- **Doubts & Fears**
- **Hard Things & Mysteries**
- **Jesus In the Real World**
- **Love/Relationships/Community**
- **The Ways of Jesus**
- **Seasonal (Thanksgiving/Christmas/New Year's/Easter)**

Each lesson in each series includes...

- 1) Leader Guide,**
- 2) Participant Handout, and**
- 3) PowerPoint slide file that includes everything you need.**

The Vertical Focus of these experiences is Jesus-centered—every single gathering invests in growing an intimate appreciation for Jesus, and practicing an intimate relationship with Him. The Horizontal Focus is a strategy of engagement that is fundamentally relational and improvisational—I mean, it's discovery-based, with the participants doing the discovery inside the boundaries I set for our pursuit, then me (and they) interacting with what they discover. We use mixed conversation groups of two, three, four, and the whole group throughout. We used debriefed experiences, projects, and storytelling in the form of film clips and video content as catalysts for conversation. These things are woven together throughout the experience.

Jesus used the power of "applied Improvisation" to engage the "intrinsic motivation" of those He was trying to challenge. I mean, all good relationships are based on improvised interactions—Jesus was a master at engaging people where they were at, then challenging them to wrestle with deeper truths. He created an environment that was naturally transformational by using conversation, debate, and "debriefed" experiences to teach. His goal, and ours, is to expect others discover something before you tell them something. Whatever the truth we're trying to communicate, we find a way to get them exploring that truth before we explore it for them. Then we interact with what they discover by simply responding (in an improv way) with questions, challenges, and insights. This process creates an "intrinsic motivation momentum" in people, because the discovery is enjoyable on its own.

There has been very little variation in the conventional model of faith-formation or discipleship ministry for more than a century—it's a leader talking, participants listening or sometimes reading, followed by questions that are sometimes painfully obvious, leading, or based on rote knowledge. The only element in many churches that invites participation is the worship-music time, and because the standard for worship music has leaned, more and more, toward performance, many people don't participate in it. Rarely in church, or in small groups, do people experience an active, participatory discovery of truth.

But young people and adults want to be part of a conversation; not passive consumers of a monologue. Researchers, marketers, and social scientists say today's young adults...

- are entrepreneurial by nature
- insist on hands-on participation in their learning
- are “micro-interactors”—trained to quickly create and deliver their responses
- will pay attention to messages if they have a role in producing them, and
- want “authentic” experiences, not scripted ones...

I've studied what Jesus did whenever He was trying to engage people to help them grow and mature—His “teaching moments.” Then I put rough percentages next to each strategy. Here's my breakdown:

- Telling Truths or Principles to an “Audience”—15%
- Telling a Story or a Parable or a Metaphor—20%
- Using an Experience as a Teaching Moment—35%
- Casual Conversations With People—15%
- Debates or Formal Defenses of Himself—15%

This means that Jesus prioritized participatory discovery in 85 percent of His “teaching” or “intentional growth” encounters. Whether He was telling a story that caused people to wrestle and ask questions, or plunging them into an experience that transformed them, or deepening their faith through vigorous conversation, Jesus was all about participation, not presentation. So, if we pattern what we do after Jesus' participatory strategies (which perfectly map to the way young adults want to learn) we'll...

**1. Use a “Prompt” to kick off discovery.** Just as Jesus did, we can use a story (or a photo or object or film clip) or a discovery question (tied to something Jesus said or did, or tied to a truth you want them to pursue) as a prompt to start exploring.

**2. Create “Targets” for people to pursue.** Whatever the truth you're trying to focus on, find a way to get them exploring that truth before you explore it for them. Do this by...

- Asking clarifying questions about the “prompt.
- Asking challenging “Why?” questions that get at the heart—not “What happened when the Centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant?” but “Why exactly did Jesus praise the Centurion's faith?”
- Ask “Bridge” questions that help people dig deep into Jesus or Scripture or truth. What connecting passage or truth do you target to explore, using insights discovered through your prompt?
- Interact with whatever people discover—embrace, clarify, further their thoughts, or ask follow-up questions.

All of this is, by the way, invigorating for leaders—it requires a dependence on the Spirit of Jesus, and follows the way He engaged others to help them grow... Most people, for most of their life, do not experience another person paying ridiculous attention to the threads of their story. We can learn to persevere and be more creative in our pursuit of people if we will embrace the “Jesus way” of pursuit and exercise more courage in how we relate to them...

# A User Guide to Following Jesus

Leading the Following Jesus lessons is a bit different than most are used to. These adventures into the heart of Jesus are driven by conversation, intentional interaction, storytelling (in the form of carefully chosen video clips) and experiences that serve as a launching pad for discussion. Here are guidelines for leading these lessons...

- Included in the digital folder for each lesson is a printable/editable Leader Guide, a printable/editable Participant Handout, and a PowerPoint file. Before your gathering, you'll need to print one copy of the Leader Guide and a copy of the Participant Handout for each person you expect to attend.
- Sometimes you'll need simple supplies, but most often you won't need to gather anything.
- You'll need a whiteboard or flip-pad and markers—it's a central practice in leading these lessons to "take notes" on what people in the group say. This is important for referencing back important insights, but even more, to underscore the importance of their contributions. Long experience has taught that people more quickly open up and contribute when they know their insights are important.
- You'll need a computer and a way to link that computer to a TV or screen—to show the PowerPoint slides to participants. Since many of these lessons include video or audio clips, you'll need to test the playback and audio ahead of time and adjust the volume for the group.
- Because these lessons are built around shared participation and shared discovery, your role as the Leader is to guide the group through these experiences, bringing them into and out of breakout groups and discussions, and offering "connective tissue" in the "Say" segments. Your most important role is to guide the conversations, ask follow-up questions, and add your own perspective along the way (without "trumping" or negating what someone has already said).
- These lessons are flexible—you can adapt them to any setting and time constraint—simply edit out what you need to.

Refer to the lesson example below for more detailed insight into how these lessons are constructed, and how to lead them...

## Foundations #1: A Problem to Solve

-Leader Guide-

- 1 • **Intro:** Crowd close in a circle, have participants close their eyes, then have everyone grab hands in the middle, with both hands. *(Pause)* Now have them open their eyes and try to untangle...
- 2 • **-Question (Whole Group):** Do you like or dislike solving big problems? Explain your answer.
- 3 • **Solo Exercise:** On your handout, list three problems you're facing right now in your life. *(Pause)* Now, think about *why* they are problems—what specifically qualifies them as a problem? *(Pause)*
  - **-Pairs:** Now get with a partner and share *one* of the three problems on your list—describe the problem, and what challenges you face because of it...
  - **-Questions (Whole Group):** Think about the problems you listed—are they problems created by others or created by you? How does that impact the way you deal with the problem?
  - **-Video:** Sometimes our problems are sort-of shoved into our lap, and sometimes we (unknowingly) create them ourselves... **Like this...** *(Play "The Millennial Marriage Proposal," by John Crist)*
- 4 • **Say:** We're kicking off a new series called "Foundations." We'll explore foundational truths connected to Jesus and His mission in our lives. First up—"The Big Problem."
- 5 • **-Question (Whole Group):** What problems did Jesus have in His life? Let's list as many as we can think of... *(Write on whiteboard)* Now let's circle the problems that were created by others, not created by Him... *(Circle on whiteboard)*
- 6 • **Say:** The problems we listed are like the branches on a tree—we can find the *trunk* of that tree in Genesis... Every year on Christmas Eve, King's College in Cambridge, England broadcasts a live radio version of "The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols." It's a choral/spoken-word journey toward redemption through the birth of Jesus. The first "lesson" comes from Genesis, and highlights the "Big Tree-Trunk Problem" facing Jesus... Let's first read this together *(Read aloud Genesis 3:8-15, 17-19)*.
- 7 • **Questions (Trios):** Now we'll form Trios *(count off)*. In your Trio, reference "The Big Problem" as you discuss:
  - What's the "Big Problem" that resulted from these events? Be specific.
  - Who's the "owner" of this Big Problem—man or God—and why?
  - What must happen to solve the Big Problem?
  - What challenges will hamper the solution to the Big Problem?
- 8 • **-Debrief (Whole Group):** Gather back together, ask Trios to share what they discovered, and write those discoveries on the whiteboard—interact with their insights with follow-up questions and additional insights.
  - **Say:** Let's explore the solution to The Big Problem—the Apostle Paul, a very smart man, tells us he's discovered a solution to it. First he explains the *true purpose* of the Law—the commandments and standards for righteousness in the Old Testament... Then he hints at the Big Solution to the Big Problem. *(Read aloud Romans 3:19-28)*.
  - **-Questions (Whole Group):** What's the true purpose of the law? What's the solution to the Big Problem? *(Write insights and discoveries on the white board)*
  - **Trios (they'll need Bibles):** In a moment, I'll have you get back in your Trios. I want you to put yourself in Jesus' sandals—He's got a Big Problem to solve, and the people who created the problem can't solve it on their own. So what does He do? In your Trio, scan through John 6—all of it—looking for clues to Jesus' solution to the Big Problem, then answer the questions on your paper...
- 9 • **-Debrief (Whole Group):** Gather back together and write what Trios discovered on the whiteboard or flip-pad—interact with their discoveries with follow-up questions and insights.
  - **Closing:** Get into a big circle again—with your hands in the middle and with eyes closed, have everyone grab hands again. *(Pray that your group would be empowered to join Jesus in His solution to the Big Problem)*
  - **Say:** Now let's join Jesus in His problem-solving mission... Untangle your hands.

- 1 Many lessons include simple experiences, using everyday supplies...
- 2 Questions indicate if they are for the whole group, Pairs, Trios, or Foursomes.
- 3 Solo experiences are focused for individuals
- 4 These lessons often use video clips to spark discovery and conversation—they are embedded in your PowerPoint file.
- 5 The "Say" portions are suggested ways to say what you need to say—not a script.
- 6 You'll need a whiteboard or flip-pad every time you meet. Writing shortened versions of what people say, then interacting with what they say, is very important.
- 7 Every lesson includes breaking into Pairs, Trios, or Foursomes for "pursuit work"—this gives people a chance to participate and explore with just a few others. The handout guides them through the questions.
- 8 Every lesson has "debriefing" times—when breakout groups come back together to share insights.
- 9 "Interact with their discoveries" means you ask follow-up questions, invite others' insights, and offer your own.