

Follow Christ

Developing the Lifestyle
of an Intentional Disciple



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**Our
Sunday
Visitor**

www.osv.com

Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division
Our Sunday Visitor, Inc.
Huntington, Indiana 46750

Nihil Obstat:
Msgr. Michael Heintz, Ph.D.
Censor Librorum

Imprimatur:
✠ Kevin C. Rhoades
Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend
October 2, 2015

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Published 2016.

21 20 19 18 17 16 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

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Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 200 Noll Plaza,
Huntington, IN 46750; 1-800-348-2440.

ISBN: 978-1-61278-939-2 (Inventory No. T1712)
eISBN: 978-1-61278-942-2
LCCN: 2016935170

Cover design: Amanda Falk
Cover art: Shutterstock

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Introduction

“Follow me.”

— Jesus of Nazareth

There’s a great scene in the television miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth* where Peter is beginning to realize the full extent of what Jesus requires of every disciple. You see Peter struggling with the reality that Christ is calling him to choose between living for his desires or following Jesus to learn an entirely new way of living that would impact everything—his entire life, all his plans, his lifestyle, occupation, and family.

As we read the Gospels, we see that Peter’s life as a disciple was an ongoing process of conversion. He matured in a relationship with Jesus, which was only possible as a result of the Lord’s initiative. Jesus chose Peter, drew him into relationship with Himself, and trained him to do the will of a loving Father by proclaiming the kingdom of God in word and power. Ultimately, the Lord Jesus empowered Peter in the Holy Spirit to live this completely new lifestyle and continue His mission.

The call to follow Jesus was not a “once and done” event for Peter, and it won’t be for us. Following Christ means growing in relationship with Jesus and His community of disciples. It is critically important in reading the New Testament to see that following Christ is based on God’s initiative—His love for us, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. He sanctifies and empowers us to

move outward to share the good news. The Christian life is based on the grace of God that empowers us **AND on our response and effort to mature in doing His will.**

Let me illustrate this important truth of God's initiative and the necessity of our effort. A child is born without having anything do with it. She is conceived by her parent's love. She begins life in the nurture of her mother's womb, but when the child is born she has to breathe and draw milk from her mother in order to grow. Similarly, God initiates our calling out of His love. He gives us the grace we need to continue being transformed. However, we must make efforts in concert with his grace to mature in our life in Christ or that life will be stunted, immature, or even die.

If you choose to excel in a sport, in playing a musical instrument, or in a profession, you have to find a competent teacher who can train you in the proper techniques. You must then establish the discipline of regular practice to become proficient in applying these techniques.

According to Thomas M. Sterner, author of *The Practicing Mind*:

Everything in life worth achieving requires practice. In fact, life itself is nothing more than one long practice session, an endless effort of refining our motions. When the proper mechanics of practicing are understood, the task of learning something new becomes a stress-free experience of joy and calmness, a process which settles all areas in your life and promotes proper perspective on all of life's difficulties.

Now think about this: You and I have the chance to learn from the most intelligent, wise, loving, perfect Teacher who ever lived. And we have the chance to become His student, His disciple! We can be conformed to Jesus in every way: how

we relate to God the Father, how we view the world, how we think, how we conduct ourselves, how we relate to others, and how we use our time, gifting, and resources. By His grace and our effort, we can learn to live a joyful life, surrendering more and more over the years to the Lordship of Jesus.

A disciple of Jesus is an ardent follower who not only professes certain truths, attends church, and serves at certain functions, but who also genuinely applies the teaching of Jesus to every aspect of life. He is confidently aware that God's grace is transforming him. Disciples make Jesus and His Church their primary teachers. We learn from them how to love God above all things and how to love others as Jesus loves them. Essentially we learn to live in harmony with the Father's will, just like our elder brother, Jesus (Mt 7:21, 24; Jn 5:19–20). That is what holiness is all about!

Our growth as disciples of Jesus occurs primarily by staying close to Him, by abiding in Him (Jn 15:5). The Lord has given us certain disciplines that help support the work of His grace as we mature as His followers.

In this book, which is based on the ChristLife “Following Christ” DVD series,* Fr. Erik Arnold, Ally Ascosi, and I will look at some of these basic disciplines—disciplines that have characterized the lives of the saints throughout the ages. We devote chapters to essentials such as spending time in personal prayer each day, listening to God in Scripture, the sacraments, forgiving one another, resisting the devil, and more.

If you make these practices a regular part of your life, they will help you to grow in friendship with the Lord. These time-tested disciplines will advance your maturity in relationship with the Lord, His Church, and others.

Growing as a disciple is best done with others who choose to follow Christ and are members of the Church. That's the way the Lord intended it for us as His family. I've had the great privilege and benefit of having relationships with godly

people who loved Jesus and helped disciple me in the Christian life. I pray that will also be true for you!

Nearly fifty years ago I had a radical conversion in which the Lord Jesus laid hold of my life in great love, forgiveness, and power.**

Some months later, during a time of personal prayer, I had an experience of the Lord saying internally, “Come follow me.” I accepted His call and decided by the help of His grace to become His disciple. For all these years now, I have practiced what we will be teaching in this book. It has helped me to follow Him. He will help you also! If you will commit your life to Jesus as Lord and tell Him you want to make every effort to live as His disciple, He will answer that prayer.

So how do you begin, or renew, your commitment to follow Christ?

First, stop and pray. Honestly talk to Jesus about His call to you to be His disciple. Tell Him of your need for His Holy Spirit to empower you. Let Him know you are going to make every effort to be changed into His likeness (see 2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29).

Second, take time after reading each chapter to prayerfully decide how to apply what is taught there. Write down how you intend to apply the teaching as a normal part of your daily life. Then do it. If it is an area such as establishing a daily personal prayer life, and you mess up, just begin again. Get up and go on! Don’t stop. Keep reviewing your decisions and how you are doing. Let each particular area become habitual. Establish the area as a routine part of your discipleship lifestyle.

Third, find some other Christians who want to grow as disciples of Jesus and consider applying the teaching of this book together. Gathering together with others is an important means of maturing as a disciple.

Fourth, take time to praise God for the wonders of His grace that are at work in you, helping you to follow Jesus our Lord and make Him known!

We will be praying for you!

Dave Nodar

* *Follow Christ* is based on “Following Christ,” a video-based course developed and distributed by ChristLife, a ministry in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. For more information about ChristLife and “Following Christ,” please turn to the back pages of the book or see our website, www.christlife.org/follow.

** Dave’s story of conversion can be found in the book *Discover Christ*, which is available along with other resources at www.christlife.org.



Chapter 1

Daily Personal Prayer



Dave Nodar

Life is full of responsibilities, surprises, and countless opportunities. What are the most important things? What should compel our attention and what shouldn't? What's vital and what's peripheral? Who wouldn't want to know God's answers to these questions?

It just so happens Jesus gave us a pretty clear answer. In Matthew 22:37–40, Jesus gave us the great commandment:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus focused on what is most important: loving God and loving our neighbor. We love because God first loved us. As we experience His love we return that love. Then God impels us to love others, as He loves us. Our love extends outward, through the Great Commission given to us by Jesus to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching

them to observe all that I have commanded you.” The Great Commission is the purpose of the law, and it’s as true for us now as it was for the people who first heard Jesus say it.

Here’s a suggestion. When life gets busy, and you feel pushed by too many demands and too much responsibility, remind yourself of the greatest commandment: love God and love others. We are called to love God above all things and love others like Jesus loves them. We do this by growing in relationship with God, and prayer is a vital way to grow in knowing Him.

PRAY AS JESUS PRAYED

“What would Jesus do?” goes the popular saying. The Gospels give us a picture of Jesus as a man in constant motion, moving from place to place, healing the sick, casting out demons, teaching the people, and sparring with His enemies. But it’s also clear from the Gospels that Jesus prayed constantly.

Before He chose His disciples, “he continued in prayer to God” (Lk 6:12) all night. After feeding the five thousand with a few loaves and fish, “he went up into the hills by himself to pray” (Mt 14:23). The whole seventeenth chapter of John’s Gospel is a long prayer in which Jesus speaks to His Father intimately. In the Garden of Gethsemane He opens His anguished heart to the Father. We read that “being in an agony he prayed more earnestly” (Lk 22:44). At the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark we read, “In the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed” (Mk 1:35).

Prayer was a normal ongoing part of Jesus’ daily life. Jesus’ relationship with the Father was the most important thing in His life. Everything depended on it. To keep it strong, He spent much time alone with His Father in prayer. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “His words and works are the visible manifestation of his prayer in secret” (CCC 2602).

This intimate relationship Jesus shared with His Father is what Jesus wants for each of us. The disciples saw Jesus praying all the time, and He made it clear that He expected His disciples to pray. No wonder the disciples came to Him and asked, “Teach us to pray.” In Matthew 6, prayer is one of the practices He expects will be part of every disciple’s life. It is not optional. He doesn’t say, “*If you pray,*” or “*You might pray this way if you have time for it.*” He says, “*When you pray,*” do it like this.

“You must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Mt 6:5–8)

“Do what I do,” Jesus says. *Shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.* This is what Jesus did all the time: private personal prayer, protected time shielded from the gaze of others. *Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do.* This is how Jesus prayed: intimate conversation with His Father where He opened the deepest recesses of His heart.

Jesus is more interested in the condition of our hearts than in outward signs of piety. Our motivation for praying should be the love of God; it should not be to impress other people (or ourselves). Prayer is the way we grow closer to God and hear His voice. Jesus is not saying that public communal prayer is unnecessary. He often prayed this way. He went

to the synagogue “as was his custom” (Lk 4:16). He went to Jerusalem for the high feasts. Public prayer was a normal part of His life, and He expects it to be part of ours as well. But private personal prayer is essential too. It’s the lifeblood of our spiritual lives, as it was for Jesus.

There are many forms of prayer that the Church makes available to us. There are rosaries, novenas, inspiration from the saints, the book of Psalms, Liturgy of the Hours, prayer groups, and so on. We also have the source and summit of prayer and communion with God: The Eucharist and the liturgy of the Mass. What I want to share with you in this chapter is the value of daily personal prayer time where you are alone with God.

Jesus wants you to come to Him and learn from Him. He wants to teach you personally. We will learn about God by coming to Him, staying with Him, spending time with Him, listening to Him, and talking to Him. “Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Mt 11:29).

PRAY IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

The joy of personal prayer opened up for me about forty-five years ago when I surrendered my life to Jesus as Lord. God’s love became real for me. I was overwhelmed by His goodness and renewed in the power of His Holy Spirit. I met a God who poured out blessings on me personally, forgave my sins, and empowered me to live a new life. While I had been raised as a Catholic, baptized and confirmed, as a teenager, I moved far away from living as a Christian. When I committed my life to the Lord Jesus, I experienced a baptism of the Holy Spirit that released the power of those sacraments to live a new life.

Shortly after this conversion experience, I went to a workshop on union with God in daily personal prayer. It changed my life.

One of the most important insights I had is that God wants a personal relationship with me. God loves *me*, Dave,

a unique human being. He loves you the same way. He wants to know *you*, and He wants you to know *Him*. It's perfectly possible to go through life with a distant, somewhat impersonal relationship with God. Many people do; I did before asking Jesus to be Lord of my life. When the Holy Spirit opened my eyes, I saw that my relationship with God could be something much more intimate than anything I had ever experienced.

VISITING YOUR MOTHER

You develop a personal relationship with someone by spending time with them. If you meet someone you'd like to be friends with, you spend time with that person. If you are falling in love with someone, you go out on dates. You might follow friends on Facebook, but if they are truly good friends you also make sure you do things together like dinner or a ball game. It's the same thing with God. To develop the relationship, you have to spend the time. That's what prayer is—the time you and God spend together.

Spending the time is at least as important in a relationship as any specific thing that happens between two people. In fact, it's probably *more* important. A speaker once said he compares personal prayer to the time we spend with a close family member—your mother, for example. If your mother lives nearby, you might visit her a couple of times a week. Occasionally you will have a deep conversation, but most of the time you will talk about family members, the weather, food, ailments, your work, and the sales at the mall. You might not be very interested in some of this chitchat; you might steal a furtive glance at your watch and wonder how soon you can leave. But something important is growing under the surface. Your bond with your mother is growing stronger and deeper simply by being with her. Intimacy doesn't come through the chitchat; it's coming through the time you spend together.

So the first step in personal prayer is *taking the time*. Go to prayer with the idea you will spend at least a certain amount

of time with God. Find some time in your daily schedule and devote it to prayer. Commit yourself to it. If you're just getting started with personal prayer, try committing yourself to fifteen minutes. This time can gradually increase to perhaps thirty to sixty minutes a day. The important thing is to actually spend this time with God even though nothing much seems to be going on.

Give Him the priority time, the time He deserves as God. This time can be in the morning before you are caught up in the busyness of the day. That's the time I like to pray. Other people like to pray at the end of the day before bedtime. Some people pray during the day. The particular time you pray doesn't matter very much; think about what works with your schedule. What matters is making the time, and sticking to it.

The second step is *finding the right place to pray*. For most of us this will be somewhere in our homes. It might be the corner of a spare bedroom, an old couch in the family room downstairs, or a nook in your apartment. It could also be in church after morning Mass. Wherever you choose should be a quiet place, as free from clutter and visual distractions as possible. It's a good idea to stick to the same prayer place every day if you can. Over time it will become your sacred space and when you go there, you're ready to pray.

The next step is identifying *what you should bring to prayer*. This varies considerably from person to person. I'll share what I do. Keep in mind this is only an example of what one man does. I bring a Bible, my journal, a devotional, my planner, a pad, and a pen. I keep the pad around to jot down any distractions—the thoughts that interrupt my focus on God. I've found that I can get rid of distractions more easily if I write them down and tell myself that I'll think about them later. I usually read the daily Scriptures from a devotional, typically *The Word Among Us* magazine, and meditate on their wonderful reflections. I read and underline important Scriptures in my Bible. I use my journal to write any insights—things that the Lord is saying to me.

I always write down what the Lord has spoken to me, any senses or particular things I've offered to Him in prayer. I found this helpful because it's easy to go from a place of faith to a place of unbelief in our lives. A journal allows me to keep a record of God's promises and action in my life. It is a beautiful way to remind myself of His presence and to give thanks to God for the good things He has done.

You will have to adjust your prayer time according to circumstances and seasons in life. Parents of small children will find it difficult to stick to a set prayer time. Illness will keep you in bed. You will travel. There will be times when work and family responsibilities will be so great that you scramble to find time to do everything that needs to be done. By all means make the necessary adjustments to your prayer time. You'll be better able to cope with these pressures if you've already established the habit of regular personal prayer.

Your prayer will change over time. You might want to read more Scripture, spend more time silently listening, less time on something else. Pray about what you should do in prayer. Be led by the Holy Spirit. Be like the old peasant who spent hours before the crucifix in the church pastored by St. John Vianney, the Cure of Ars. One day St. John asked the man what he did in his time of prayer. The peasant said, "I look at Him, and He looks at me."

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

Our teacher in prayer is Jesus. When the disciples wanted to know how to pray, they went to the Lord and asked Him. He said:

Pray then like this:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;
 And forgive us our trespasses,
 As we forgive those who trespass against us;
 And lead us not into temptation,
 But deliver us from evil.

(Mt 6:9–13)

The Our Father is Jesus' most explicit teaching about prayer. What follows is a part-by-part analysis of what Jesus teaches us in the Our Father (much of this is inspired by Fr. Michael Scanlan's excellent book *Appointment with God.*)

*Our Father who art in heaven,
 Hallowed be thy name.*

The Our Father begins with praise. This is the natural starting point for prayer—praising God for who He is, thanking Him for the many blessings He has showered on us. Jesus praised His Father: “Father, I thank you that you have heard me” (Jn 11:41). “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth” (Lk 10:21). In the Liturgy of the Hours, the Church praises God throughout the day, every day, everywhere in the world. I like to praise God by praying the Psalms, such as Psalm 105:

O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
 make known his deeds among the peoples!
 Sing to him, sing praises to him,
 tell of all his wonderful works!
 Glory in his holy name;
 let the hearts of those who seek the LORD
 rejoice!
 Seek the LORD and his strength,
 seek his presence continually.

(Ps 105:1–4)

Beginning our prayer with praise helps us get in the proper posture before God. He is God and we are His creatures, He is our Father and we are His children. He is our Lord and Savior and we are His disciples!

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Next we listen to the Lord and hear what He has to say to us. Scripture is an essential help to hearing God in prayer. Take one of the readings from the Mass of the day, for example, and read it slowly and prayerfully. Ask the Lord to speak to you through it. As I mentioned before, write down any promises from the Lord, words of encouragement, direction, or key Scripture passages.

Sometimes it's hard to tell God, "Thy will be done." It can be a struggle to align your will and God's will. This struggle, the place where our will crosses with the Father's will, is where the cross is applied to our lives. It is what Jesus felt as He was wrestling in Gethsemane before His passion. This is part of a real life of prayer. We come to Him in personal prayer to learn to do His will—Thy will be done.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Next, we surrender our daily needs to God and intercede on behalf of others. The Lord is concerned about you and the things you're concerned about. Jesus says that we should ask the Lord for what we need. We should pray for our needs, the needs of others, and for those of the world. The Father is a real Father—we are His children, and children can freely ask their fathers for what they want. The Lord wants to know your heart and your desires. Personally, in order to help me remain faithful in intercession, I keep a sticky note in the front of my journal with a list of people and things I'm praying for.

*And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.*

Forgiveness is an essential part of following Christ (more on forgiveness in chapter 4). Prayer is real, not imaginary, and in daily prayer we face up to our failures and sins honestly. The Father wants us to take off our masks and be who we are before Him. He already knows who we are. He wants us to know who we are too—sinners in need of forgiveness, but also His children whom He intends to transform from the inside out. We can come to Him and say, “Father forgive me. I need your help.”

*And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.*

Shortly after my conversion I had the rude awakening to the reality that I could still yield to my temptations and fall into sin. I fell to impure thoughts. I was humbled by my weakness especially in light of my new awareness of God’s personal love for me. I confessed my sin, and asked the Lord to give me power to obey Him and, when I did fall to temptations, to give me grace to get up and go on with Him.

In this petition we recognize that our human strength is not enough for the trials and temptations that we will face this side of heaven. *Temptations are sure to come*, Jesus tells us. They are common to humanity, and the Father intends to use them to strengthen us, His children, in living for His will as we patiently surrender to His transforming power at work in us. We can pray: “Lord, lead me not into temptation; give me the power of your Spirit to resist temptations and make me holy.”

We also recognize in this petition that ultimately the author of all the evils we are prone to is the devil (more on the devil in chapter 8). With humility, we recognize that our Father has absolute authority and that we His children can approach Him for His protection to overcome the enemy. We

can have confidence that the Father hears us when we pray like this because the Lord Jesus prayed for us with these words, “I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil one” (Jn 17:15).

As we began our prayer time remembering who God is and who we are, we end our time with humility and praise to God our Father, who is Lord of heaven and earth and empowers us to live fully as His children!

Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen!

As you end your time of prayer, decide how this time with God will influence the rest of your day. What has the Lord said to you? Where do you need God the most? “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Lk 11:28). We resolve to be doers of the Word and not just hearers. Our union with God through personal prayer transforms our hearts and our minds and should also transform our actions.

One last thought about prayer: Don’t lose sight of how wonderful the gift of prayer is! Every day you have the opportunity to fall out of bed, shake off the grogginess of sleep, and spend time with God. You can talk to each other. You can tell Him your troubles. You can receive comfort and counsel from Him. You can grow in wisdom and strength and learn how to walk with Christ. He will transform you as you come to be with Him in an ongoing way! What a great gift He offers us!

PRACTICAL APPLICATION TO BECOME “DOERS OF THE WORD”

Begin planning your personal prayer time—time, location, etc. Write down your intentions and talk to the Lord, asking Him for grace to establish a daily personal prayer time as a normal ongoing part of your life.