FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH
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SERMON:	***Whatever, Whenever, Wherever***
SERIES:	***Energized for Action***
SCRIPTURES:	***Luke 9:23–25; Matthew 7:21–23; John 6:60–69***
SPEAKER:	***Larry Belella***
DATE:	***2026 – 10 - 4***

Credit to Pastor Kyle Idleman and his book "Not a Fan"

INTRODUCTION

So, here we are well into football season. Any football fans in here? See if you can recall what is probably the single most miraculous football play of all time. It was December 23, 1972 and it happened during the AFC Divisional playoff game between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Oakland Raiders. It was 4th down and 10 yards to go and the Steelers' last chance to win with only 22 seconds left on the clock.

Steeler quarterback Terry Bradshaw scrambled out of the pocket on his own 40-yard line and tried to throw a deep pass to his running back. But instead, the ball bounced off a Raiders defender for what looked like an incomplete pass ending the game. But the deflected pass was caught just inches off the turf by Franco Harris, who ran it in for the game-winning touchdown with just 5 seconds remaining.

If you are really a football fan, you know that story.

But, being a football fan doesn't mean you have a stake in the game. When it comes to Jesus, there is a huge difference between a fan and a follower.

Good morning, Five Forks Church – thank you for being here today. And thank you for joining us online or if you are listening on the podcast.

As we continue our year-long theme of becoming Energized for Action, I would like for us to focus today on one particular part of our lifelong goal here at Five Forks of

knowing, loving, and following Jesus. To expand on that a bit, knowing means getting to know Jesus intimately, loving Jesus means loving Him with all of our being, and following means living our lives as He did. You see, all three of these actions are intertwined. But for today, I would like us to explore what it looks like to really be a Jesus follower and the action or actions that we could and should take in truly *following* Jesus. So, let's begin.

If you were to walk into a major stadium on any given Saturday or Sunday afternoon in the fall, you would see a remarkable thing. You would see thousands of people wearing the exact same colors. You would see face or chest paint, team jerseys, and people screaming until their voices gave out. They know every stat of their favorite player. They know the history of the franchise. They can recite the legendary plays from twenty or more years ago, and they will most always second-guess coaching decisions when things don't go well.

And they are, for the most part, pretty devoted fans.

But if you look closely at what is happening in that stadium, you notice an obvious reality: not a single one of those people in the stands is playing in the game.

They are sitting in those super comfortable, plastic seats. They are balancing trays of nachos and a drink in their hands. They bought a ticket that allows them to watch someone else run, sweat, and sometimes bleed. They are enthusiastic. They are knowledgeable. They are loud. But when the game gets difficult, when the weather turns freezing, or when the team starts losing, they can get up, walk out to their cars, and go home without a single bruise or scratch.

They are the fanatics. Or fans.

In his book, *Not a Fan*, pastor Kyle Idleman asks a simple but hard question that every single person sitting here today and in churches everywhere has to answer. In it, he asks this question:

Are you a fan, or are you a follower?

Unfortunately, we have made it pretty easy to be a fan of Jesus.

Fans want to be close enough to Jesus to enjoy the benefits, but not so close that it costs them anything. Fans like the idea of forgiveness, but they aren't interested in changing their sinful ways. Fans love the promise of heaven, but they don't want anything to do with a cross. Fans will cheer for Jesus from the safety of the stands, but they refuse to step onto the field where obedience demands sacrifice. Think about it - the modern church in North America has, in many ways, become a giant stadium designed to cater to fans. We build comfortable auditoriums. We tweak the lighting, fine tune the sound systems, polish the sermons, and create the atmosphere to make sure people enjoy the experience. And we *should* be offering our best to Him. But sometimes we offer low-commitment Christianity that fits neatly into a busy weekend schedule. We invite people to accept Jesus like He is a product to be consumed, a helper to fix our problems, or a safety insurance policy for the afterlife.

You see,

Jesus never invited anyone to be a fan.

So, today, we are going to take a closer look at what it means to move from the comfort of the spectator stands into the reality of what it means to really follow Jesus. We are going to look at three characteristics of a fan, and then we are going to look at the three radical characteristics that Jesus requires from anyone who dares to call themselves a follower. So, first let's take a look at...

I. The Anatomy of a Fan

Simply put,

A fan is defined as an enthusiastic admirer.

To understand where we stand with God, we first have to stop hiding behind the religious vocabulary we have learned, even from when we were kids. Many of us have been in church long enough to know the "right" answers. We may even be a champion of sword drills or Bible Jeopardy. We know when to raise our hands, when to nod, and how to look devout. But Jesus is not interested in our religious motions; He is interested in our hearts.

So,

How do you know if you are a fan rather than a follower?

Here are a few key indicators of that of a fan.

A. Knowledge of vs. Intimacy with Jesus

The first indicator of being a fan is confusing knowledge *about* Jesus with an authentic relationship *with* Jesus. Pastor Brady just spoke to us about authenticity over the past several weeks. So, let's get authentic with ourselves.

You can know everything *about* a person without ever knowing *the* person. For example, you can buy a biography of a famous historical figure, read it ten times, memorize their birth date, memorize their speeches, and map out their hometown—and yet, if that person walked into the room, they would look at you as a complete stranger.

In Matthew 7:21–23 (NIV), near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus delivers one of the most sobering warnings in all of scripture. Not to unbelievers or outsiders, but to those claiming to be righteous on the outside:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" Matthew 7:21–23 (NIV)

Notice what these people had. They had the right vocabulary—they said "Lord, Lord." They had religious credentials—they performed miracles, cast out demons, and spoke in His name. From the outside, they *looked* like devoted followers. But Jesus does not say, "You didn't do enough work," or "You didn't have correct theology." He looks at them and says, *"I never knew you."*

The word used for "knew" in the New Testament translates as an intimate, relational knowledge, not just being aware of someone. You see,

Fans study the manual; followers *know* the Master.

Fans collect facts about Jesus so they can feel spiritually superior or secure; followers spend time in the presence of Jesus because He is their very life. But Jesus says that in order to enter the kingdom of Heaven, we have to be -

The one who does the will of my Father

If your personal faith consists primarily of knowing Bible trivia, agreeing with historic creeds, and recognizing sermon illustrations, but you don't talk to Jesus in secret, don't hear His voice in His Word, and don't experience His presence in your daily life, you may be a fan who knows *about* Him without actually *knowing* Him. Second…

B. Custom-Built Religion

The second characteristic of a fan is the desire for a customized, tailor-made Jesus.

We live in a culture that tells us we can customize anything to fit our wants. You can go to a coffee shop and order a drink with all kinds of milk alternatives, flavored syrups, precise temperatures, and custom toppings. You can customize your phone interface, or pick what you want to watch on all sorts of streaming platforms, and tailor your online shopping preferences.

But unfortunately, fans adopt this same mindset to their approach to Jesus. Fans want a "Burger King" Jesus, right? A savior where we can "have it our way." For example,

- We like the Jesus who heals the sick, so we take that part.
- We like the Jesus who speaks about love, grace, and non-judgment, so we embrace that fully.
- We like the Jesus who promises to supply all our needs, so we quote that verse daily.

But how about this - what happens when we encounter the Jesus who speaks about sexual purity? What happens when we meet the Jesus who commands us to forgive the person who betrayed us? What happens when we meet the Jesus who tells us to manage our money as stewards rather than owners, or who calls us to love our enemies?

Listen, when fans encounter a command of Jesus that contradicts their lifestyle, political views, personal comfort, or cultural norms, they customize Jesus. In other words, they create an idol—a god who looks surprisingly like themselves, agrees with all their opinions, and never demands hard or radical change.

A follower does not have a pick-and-choose theology. A follower recognizes that if Jesus is Lord, He is Lord of *all*—or He is not Lord at all. You see,

Followers don't sit in judgment over the teachings of Christ; they allow the teachings of Christ to sit in judgment over themselves.

C. Seeking the Gifts or Seeking the Giver

The third characteristic of a fan is a relationship built purely on what I would call "the WOW factor".

In John chapter 6, Jesus performs one of His most famous miracles: the feeding of the five thousand. You probably know this. A massive crowd had followed Him into a remote area, and using just five small barley loaves and two small fish, Jesus miraculously multiplied the food until everyone was completely full, leaving twelve baskets of leftovers.

The crowd was ecstatic. They had found their ultimate leader! A man who could heal their diseases *and* provide free lunch? This is fantastic! They immediately tried to force Him to be their king.

But look at what happens the very next day. Jesus crosses to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and the crowd travels around the lake to find Him. When they arrive, Jesus confronts their motives directly in John 6:26:

> **"I tell you the truth, you want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs."**

Jesus exposed their hearts. They didn't want *Him*; they wanted what He could *do* for them.

They were fans of the bread, not followers of Jesus, the Bread of Life.

As long as Jesus was filling their stomachs, they were ready to crown Him king. But later in that same chapter, Jesus starts talking about the real cost of following Him. He talks

about complete, sacrificial identification with His life, suffering, and death. He tells them that true life requires total dependence on Him.

How did the crowd react when His teaching shifted from physical blessings to spiritual surrender? Here's how they responded in John 6:60 (NLT):

Many of his disciples said, "This is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?" John 6:60 (NLT)

And then verse 66 is the sad result:

At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him. John 6:66 (NLT)

That, friends, is the line between a fan and a follower.

A fan follows Jesus as long as the relationship produces what we see as good results — blessed finances, good health, happy family life, emotional comfort, and public approval. But the moment the road gets rough, the moment when suffering occurs, the moment where obedience requires sacrifice, or the moment God's plan doesn't line up with their personal agenda, the fan walks away.

A follower stays, not because the circumstances are easy, but because they have come to the same conclusion as Simon Peter. In John 6:67, when Jesus looked at the remaining twelve disciples after the crowd deserted Him, He asked,

"Are you also going to leave?" John 6:67 (NLT)

But Peter answered in John 6:68-69 (NLT):

"Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of God." John 6:68-69 (NLT)

II. The Radical Call of Jesus

So, if Jesus rejects fan loyalty, what does following Jesus actually look like?

Jesus was and is very clear about this. In Luke chapter 9:23-25, Jesus tells it like it is:

Then he said to the crowd, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed? **(Luke 9:23–25 NLT)**

In this scripture alone, Jesus summarizes the three non-negotiable requirements for anyone who wants to move from being a fan to being a follower. So, let's take a closer look at these three requirements for being a follower. First...

A. They "Must Deny Themselves"

The first step of being a follower is stepping down off of our thrones.

In our modern culture, "self-denial" is very rare and hard to find. We are inundated with messages that preach the false gospel of self-fulfillment: *Express yourself, indulge yourself, love yourself, follow your heart, put yourself first.*

Even within the walls of the church, Christianity is often marketed as the ultimate self-help tool. People are told that Jesus exists to help them achieve their dreams, maximize their potential, and live their "best life now."

But Jesus turns all of that upside down. He doesn't say, "Whoever wants to be my disciple (or follower) must discover themselves." He says, they **"Must deny themselves."**

To deny yourself doesn't mean simply giving up chocolate for Lent or some other guilty pleasure. The original word used here for deny means to utterly disown, to renounce, to say "no" to yourself so that you can say "yes" to another. It means stepping off the throne of your life and letting Jesus sit there instead.

For example, and I know that this is a simple illustration that may resonate with many of you. Joyce gets frustrated with me at times when we are out and need to find a place to eat. Many times she says, “Would you just make a decision?!?” or, “I picked last time, so now it’s your turn.” Now, what I have come to learn over the years that it turns out best if I let her suggest some places and pick from those. Sometimes I just do this for fun. But in reality, I want to think that I am looking out for her best interests in that category instead of making what could come across as a selfish decision. I want to understand, even in the smallest of things, that denying myself means recognizing that my life is no longer about my comfort, my ambition, my rights, or my personal kingdom. But more importantly, when it comes to following Jesus, it means coming to realize that we are no longer the director of our own story. It means,

Doing the will of the Father

So, when your desires conflict with God’s Word, self-denial means your desires lose. When your feelings contradict God’s truth, self-denial means your feelings bow down. When your plans clash with God’s calling, self-denial means your plans are abandoned.

A fan asks: *"How can Jesus fit into my life?"*

A follower asks: *"How can my life be yielded completely to Jesus?"*

The next requirement is this:

B. "Take Up Your Cross - Daily"

The second requirement is perhaps the most misunderstood scripture in the church today: **"Take up their cross."**

Today, we wear polished gold crosses around our necks. We print them on t-shirts, stickers on our cars, and turn them into decorations in our homes. We have essentially sanitized the cross. We sometimes use the phrase "my cross to bear" to describe minor, everyday annoyances like:

- "My nagging injury is just my cross to bear."
- "My difficult landlord is my cross to bear."
- "My slow internet connection is my cross to bear."

To the first-century listener hearing Jesus speak these words, the cross was not a piece of jewelry, a religious symbol, or a mild inconvenience.

The cross was an instrument of humiliating execution.

When a person in the Roman Empire was seen walking down the street carrying a heavy wooden cross beam, everyone in the city knew one undeniable fact: *That person was not coming back.* They were on a one-way trip to die. They had forfeited all their rights, all their earthly possessions, all their future plans, and their very life. They were a dead man walking.

When Jesus tells His hearers to "take up their cross," He is saying: **Come and die.** What?!? Come and die?!?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was executed by the Nazi regime for his faithful stand against evil, writes this in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*:

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Listen – not physical death – it's a call to crucify our pride, our selfishness, our sinful passions, and our demand to be in control.

Notice the timing word that Jesus adds in Luke's gospel: **"Daily."**

Jesus was crucified once for all in our place, but

Spiritual crucifixion is an ongoing, moment-by-moment choice.

You don't carry your cross just at an altar call when you are teenager at summer camp or a concert. You don't carry it once when you get baptized. As a follower, you carry it when you wake up every morning. You know, daily.

- You take up your cross when you choose to forgive your spouse who hurt you instead of holding a grudge.
- You take up your cross when you choose to be honest at work or school even when lying would make you look better than the next person.
- You take up your cross when you spend your time and resources serving the poor, the marginalized, and the lonely instead of prioritizing your own pleasures.

Taking up your cross daily means waking up every morning, looking in the mirror, and saying, "You don't get to run my life today. Jesus is in charge."

C. "And Follow Me"

The third demand is active, continuous movement: **"Follow Me."**

When Jesus walked the earth, He didn't say, "Subscribe to my YouTube channel." He didn't say, "Like my page." He didn't say, "Just watch me from the sidelines."

He looked men and women in the eye and issued a radical, life-altering invitation. He said these two words:

"Follow Me."

Following, in this case, is a verb, right? It requires action. You can't follow someone while standing completely still.

Many people confuse *believing* in Jesus with *following* Jesus. They think that because they prayed a prayer twenty years ago or signed a decision card, they are set, even if their actual daily direction looks *no different* from the rest of the world.

Faith that doesn't result in a changed life, in active step-by-step obedience, is not saving faith; it's just simply that of a fan. Listen,

Following Jesus means going where He goes, loving who He loves, serving how He serves, and walking as He walked.

- If Jesus spent His time with the stranger, the outcast and the broken, a follower has to find those and spend time with them. Who are the outcasts and the broken in our community?
- If Jesus spent His life in prayer, dependence on the Father, and generous service, a follower can't live a life any other way.

To follow Jesus means that He sets the destination, He picks the path, and He sets the pace. Your job is simply to keep your eyes fixed on Him and keep taking steps towards Him and at His direction, no matter where that path leads.

III. The Paradox of Surrender

At this point, your heart might feel kind of heavy. You might be thinking: *This sounds overwhelming. This sounds like a hard, painful way to live. Why would anyone choose to deny themselves, carry a cross daily, and surrender their life so completely?*

Jesus answers exactly that in Luke 9 verse 24:

> ***"If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. "*** **Luke 9:24 (NLT)**

It all boils down to this. You have a choice to make between these two equations:

THE WORLD'S EQUATION: Hold Tight + Preserve Self + Pursue Gain = So called Life & Security

-OR-

JESUS' EQUATION: Let Go + Die to Self + Surrender All = True & Eternal Life

The good life. The world tells you that life is found in grabbing, hoarding, protecting, and promoting yourself. Jesus says that if you try to hold onto your life, your plans, and your desires, you will ultimately end up losing the very thing you are trying so desperately to save. You will end up with an empty, shallow, fragile existence that crumbles the moment life throws a crisis at you, leaving you bankrupt for eternity.

But, **if you are willing to open your hands, let go of your control, lay down your life, and lose it for His sake, you will finally find the life you were actually created to live**.

The cost of following Jesus is high—it costs you everything. But the cost of *not* following Jesus is far higher. Not following Jesus costs you:

- true peace
- lasting joy
- divine purpose
- your very soul

When you trade your fan status in for becoming a true follower, you are not trading a good life for a miserable one. You are trading a fake, temporary, shallow illusion of life for deep, unshakable, eternal reality.

IV. Conclusion: Time to Step Off the Bleachers

So, what are some practical steps to becoming a true follower of Jesus?

First, we need the desire for a comfortable, cultural, risk-free faith to be over. The world doesn't need any more fans of Jesus who just wear the t-shirt, just sing the songs, or just attend the events, and go on living lives no different from the surrounding culture.

The church does not need bigger crowds of spectators cheering from the stands.

The church needs Jesus followers. Full stop.

So today, the invitation comes directly from Jesus to you. Not to your neighbor, not to your spouse, not to the person sitting next to you—but to you.

Jesus is looking into your heart today, past all the church background, past all the religious talk, and He is asking you the ultimate question:

"_____ , are you a fan... or are you a follower?"

- Are you ready to stop limiting Jesus only to what He can give you, and start worshiping Him for who He is?
- Are you ready to stop adapting His Word to fit your lifestyle, and start conforming your lifestyle to His Word?
- Are you ready to step off the throne of your life, take up your cross and die daily, deny yourself, and walk in His footsteps?

It’s gonna cost you. It will cost you your comfort. It will cost you your pride. It may cost you popularity, career advancement, or worldly success. Again, it will cost you your life.

But, the life that Jesus offers is the one for which you were created.

Every single person in this room and watching online has a gift or talent that God has given you to use and share for His glory. Don't settle for being a fan in the stands when you were created to be a follower on the field. Don’t let that gift that God has created in you to slip away – use it to glorify Him and encourage His people.

If you are a student or young person here today, I pray that Jesus is on the throne today and throughout your life, no matter where He leads you.

The stands are comfy, but the field is where life happens. The stands are safe, but the field is where miracles occur. The stands are full of fans, but the Kingdom of God requires followers.

Lace up your cleats. Put down your snacks. Step off the bleachers.

Deny yourself. Take up your cross daily. And follow Him.

So, become energized and take that action to follow Him *Wherever* He takes you. *Whatever* He wants you to do. *Whenever* He wants you to do it. So, starting today, find at least one area of your walk of faith where you can work on becoming less of a fan and more of a true follower of Jesus. So,

Are you a fan or are you a follower?