

# 4 Cultural Characteristics that Make Discipleship an Uphill Battle

📅 Jun 13, 2024

One of the primary terms the Bible uses to describe our relationship with Jesus is the word “walk.” It’s a good word; it has the connotation of a forward progression. We aren’t meant to have a stagnant relationship with our Lord; instead, we are making forward progress in intimacy and obedience.

But there are certain characteristics of our culture that make this walk seem like it’s going uphill. These are attributes that are so infectiously true of the environment we live in that they inevitably work their way into our own lives just because we are humans at this given place and at this given time. Unfortunately, though, these cultural characteristics are also obstacles to discipleship, this long walk in the same direction with Jesus. It’s important, then, for us, the people of the walk on the way to recognize some of the factors that make this walk so arduous sometimes.

## 1. The craving for immediacy.

We live in the culture of *now*, and because we do, we are the people of *now*. My children’s generation is the first generation that don’t know a life without the internet, that don’t know what it means to have to do slow research in paper books or even wait for the regularly scheduled time for a TV program. We are a microwave people living in a microwave world. And that craving for immediacy in all things runs against discipleship, which is by its very nature a long, long road.

I love how Psalm 84 describes this long road: *“Happy are the people whose strength is in You, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage” (Psalm 84:5).*

Note particularly that he didn’t say that our hearts are set in a sprint or a stroll; rather, our hearts are on pilgrimage. It’s a long journey together with Jesus.

## 2. The avoidance of adversity.

We live in a culture that will do almost anything to alleviate pain, difficulty, or adversity. When

we meet with things like adversity, we simply leave the relationship, we quit the job, or we walk away from the challenge. We like to be really good really quickly, and if we don't have that instant gratification, we are likely to turn the other way and try to escape.

But adversity is one of God's most effective crucibles for spiritual growth. Indeed, James said that without adversity, we will never truly grow into maturity:

*"Consider it a great joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.*

*But endurance must do its complete work, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1:2-4).*

The stance of rejoicing instead of escaping is counter-intuitive to most everyone in the world today. But for those committed to the walk of spiritual growth, it's absolutely essential.

### **3. The crowding of messages.**

Whether you know it or not, you are constantly being marketed to. TV, billboards, radio – these are only the obvious ones. But everywhere, all the time, someone is trying to get a message into you. But that's okay because we have conditioned ourselves to be able to concentrate on more than one thing at a time. But this division of focus runs contrary to the single-minded disciple who is seeking the kingdom of God. The writer of Hebrews described this focus like this:

*"Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us,*

*keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1-2).*

Notice what we are being told to throw off so that we can keep our eyes fixed on Jesus: There is the sin that easily trips us up, of course, but there are also apparently other things that might not necessarily be sin, but nonetheless can serve as weights around our ankles in the walk of discipleship. Whether a seemingly innocent distraction or a downright sin, they both must be thrown off so that we might have an uncrowded pursuit of Him.

### **4. The complicating of process.**

We love processes in our culture, don't we? And many times, the more complex the process is the better. It seems that the most complicated we make something the better we feel when we finally accomplish it. That's also true in church many times.

We have all kinds of metrics and all kinds of measures and all kinds of processes to go through, all designed to produce and measure spiritual growth. While many of these might have their merits, it does seem that we have, at times, very much complicated the issue. Discipleship is a matter of seeking to know God and doing what He says.

know HIM and follow HIM. That's it. Everything else is an aid to that simple, core message.

We live in a culture that is immediate, adversity-adverse, crowded, and overcomplicated. Here, too, as disciples of Jesus, we are meant to be salt and light. We are meant to stand distinct from this pattern as we walk with Him, even if that means we are going uphill for a while.

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By Michael Kelley, Rooted Network Executive Director

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