




# PERFORMERS AS DISCIPLES AND DISCIPLES AS PERFORMERS

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**Daniel Jones**


“Nobody else,” Anthony went on, “sees you as you are. Nobody else will give you such a difficult and unpleasant time as I do. You’ll never be comfortable, but you may be glorious. You’d better think over it.”

ANTHONY TO DAMARIS IN “*THE PLACE OF THE LION*”  
CHARLES WILLIAMS



I became interested in acting at about the same time I started going to church. I was baptized and smacked the new label “Christian” on myself. It was an exciting time and a confusing time. One world held riding buses into New York, pounding the pavement, going on auditions, getting a gig here and there and trying to feel out the art of becoming an actor. The other world held youth group meetings, choir robes, weekend retreats and Wednesday night dinners. Neither world made sense to the other. I found myself asking the question, *How can I be in both?*

It felt like some freak split-screen world, like in the movie *Sliding Doors*—this is what your life would look like if *this* happened, and this is what your life would look like if *that* happened. I knew I really liked art and acting, but when I looked around church, I didn’t see anything deeply artistic. Sure, there were Easter cantatas and musicals, but nothing theatrical that satisfied me fully. At the same time, I wasn’t fitting into the acting world because of the whole Jesus thing. I wondered if God even thought it was okay to for me to act.



I didn’t know how to be a disciple of Jesus and a performer; I didn’t know how to be a performer and a disciple of Jesus. I felt duplicitous. And not good. I came to the conclusion that I probably had to choose one or the other. I chose for a time to live in the land of duplicity and continue performing, calling myself a believer. But I was never fully given over to being a disciple.

I think that is where many of us begin. We have the clear call to follow God. Is there anything better than that, really? But then we have this artsy, performer side that doesn’t have much room to stretch in the Christian community. And if we venture out, we face the struggle of knowing how to be disciples while being performers.

## **FOLLOW ME**

In the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says to a group of fishermen, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” (Mark 1:17). Immediately, the dudes drop their nets and leave everything behind to follow Jesus. At that very moment, Simon and Andrew, and then



later James and John, become disciples of God. When we choose to follow Jesus, we choose to become disciples. It's a good deal: we get to see miracles, healings, other folks being changed by God. And we get in on the hard stuff, the costly things that come with following God. The things we see and hear prompt our growth if we continue to trust Jesus. As long as we follow him, we are his disciples.

The call is always to be disciples. We only change that when we refuse to be discipled. Jesus says, "Come. Follow me." And we're all, "Okay Jesus, I'm gonna drop my nets, except for that performer, actor, artist thing . . . yeah, I need that." The Savior of the world calls out to us; and although we may respond immediately, we continue to hang onto other things we want. How crazy is that?! I am truly convinced that in order to be a performer and a disciple as a whole person, you have to hold the performer thing pretty lightly and, if pushing and shoving gets started, be willing to let go of it altogether.

We must be willing to let go because some of what has been raised up in us as performers is unhealthy. Many of us worked at performing long before we gave ourselves to following Jesus. We have to restructure to become disciples. Our performance training sets up expectations that don't necessarily match Jesus' plans for our good. When I think about art from a Jesus angle, for example, it seems important to consider whether we could make art differently, with new meaning and purpose. Could our art look different from the way Hollywood or Broadway produces art? There's nothing in my artistic training that would help me think that way. But Jesus does.

I've seen some performers become unrealistic about who and what God wants us to become. They equate worldly success with blessing from God. We know the way to be successful has nothing to do with "success," but it's so hard to remember that. I see people who have wanted Jesus but have never given

themselves over to him. Unless we release our art into his hands, no success will be whole. And we may miss God's blessing, his unique call on our lives.

### MAKING A DECISION

I remember the moment: I was deciding whether to go to graduate school or to do ministry in which I had the opportunity to be both performer and disciple. Had I gone to grad school, I would have been part of a prestigious conservatory program. I would have had top-quality training for three years straight and little time for anything else—not really even a church community (maybe Sunday morning—but is that really enough?).

The other option was doing ministry—building a new community, and learning to disciple, lead bible studies, communicate the gospel, receive healing and have accountability. And part of my job would be developing art and theater and performing in multiple contexts. It seems like a no-brainer now. But at the time, it was a mighty struggle to decide.

I remember sitting in the car in front of my church with my pastor. We talked about my struggle to decide what I wanted to do. All the pieces were out on the table (or dashboard), and I was resisting a decision. I wanted Jesus, but, dang, I wanted the art thing as well. It made me so mad. She read this Scripture to me: "God has a future with hope for you" (Jeremiah 29:11). And the more truth I heard, the angrier I became. I rolled my eyes. I squirmed in my seat, opened the door, shut the door, opened the door again, shifted and tried not to really listen. The pastor wasn't telling me what to do. But I knew what God was saying. The competing voice in my head asked, *What will I lose out on if I don't continue training as an actor?* and *What will my life look like if I don't go about it in the expected way?*

My pastor asked, "How do you want your life to be useful?" In that moment, clarity smacked me. That was the question. I wanted to be useful both as an actor and as a disciple,

but I wasn't willing to let go of the art thing as I knew it and according to my plan. It was mine and I was entitled to it. I wasn't taking into account that it was something God had given me in the first place, that he knew me and knew that part of me . . . and that he might even want to bless me through drama. I thought that perhaps God had different ways for me to do acting. I didn't really trust that if I took the risk to let go of it, God would honor that decision and redeem what I had let go of. I questioned whether God could really bless me and make me a blessing.

### CAN I REALLY BE BOTH?

We can see ourselves as one or the other: actor or follower, artist or disciple. I thought I had to set up strict boundaries (sometimes we *do*) to separate my performer world from my Christian world. We wouldn't want the two intermingling! They're like Uncle Jarvis on your Dad's side and Aunt Bernice on your Mom's—the relatives you work hard to keep from sitting at the same table at the wedding reception. It would work better, in an attempt to help them get along, to acknowledge that we can't control them. I thought I could control each of my realms separately, but I couldn't. And looking back, I'm glad I couldn't.

We need space to be disciples, to trust God with our futures, knowing he is faithful. We can let go of anything in our lives for the sake of the gospel and know Jesus will give us what's better. Without Jesus as Lord—fully in charge—we remain in pieces and unable to integrate our realms. God wants blessing for us, but if we choose to operate in fear and distrust, we cut ourselves off from what God may have for us as performers.

What I've found is that, as Scripture and countless stories of faith lay out for us, when

we surrender the parts of our lives we cling to the most, God redeems us and allows us to do and see and be part of extraordinary things. When we really become disciples, when we stick close to Jesus, we get to see the most and be in on the most. Being performers is part of our story, which becomes part of God's story. It's good to hope that God does something with the performer in you. And it is good to become a whole person with all of you integrated as a follower of God. You can be both performer and disciple.

### A GLIMPSE OF HOPE

A little over a year ago, we were performing a play on Mark's Gospel at a conference. Natalie, a student who was in a study I led on the first half of the Gospel of Mark (yes, it was a packed week) came to see the performance. What she had been discovering in the Scripture met the story she saw unfold on the stage. She saw Jesus in a completely new way. That night she went out by the lake, sat on a rock for a long time and prayed. As she listened to God, she realized that she had been around Jesus but had never made an adult decision to follow him. She then took the risk to follow Jesus.

That story overwhelms me for so many reasons. For starters, it's been wonderful to watch Natalie grow as a follower of Jesus and leader of others. But it is also a sign to me of God's faithfulness. That week I was doing the two things that I took a risk to do instead of full-time performing: teaching the Bible and acting in a play. In that week, God wove my life together. I taught the Scripture and I did a theater performance. God spoke to Natalie and she became a follower of God. And he spoke to me, still more deeply, about how I am becoming a follower too.