

True Discipleship

What does it mean to be a Christian? Some people think you're a Christian if your family is Christian. Others think you're a Christian if you were baptized when you were a baby. Some people think you're a Christian if you go to church, but that doesn't necessarily make you a Christian. As one wise old person once said, "Just because a mouse lives in a cookie jar, doesn't make him a cookie!" There are some people around the world who think if you live in America, you are a Christian. Imagine that! But what does it mean to be a Christian?

There are different ways of describing Christians in the Bible but one very helpful way is what we find in this passage. A Christian is someone who is following Jesus. Are you following Jesus? Then you are a Christian. Are you not following Jesus? Then you have no right to bear the name.

Now being a follower of Jesus does not mean that you are perfect or that you never sin. But it means that you have placed your trust in Jesus as God's Son who died for you, you confess your sin as sin and turn away from it, and you have set your life to follow Christ and His commands. That's what it means to be a Christian. Jesus calls people to be His disciples, to follow him.

In today's passage Jesus talks about true discipleship, what it means to be one of His followers. But the passage begins not with our mission but with Jesus' mission. And that makes sense. If we are to follow Christ, then we need to know about His mission, what His life was all about. That is what Jesus taught His the crowd and His disciples in verse 31, **"And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."** We looked at this verse last week. What form does Jesus' Messiahship take? And the answer is: it is "cross-shaped." Cross-shaped. Jesus came to suffer, be rejected, to die, and to rise again. If that is what it means for Jesus to be the Christ, what does it mean to be a follower of Christ?

Listen to what Jesus teaches starting in verse 34:

Mark 8:34 - 38

34 When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

35 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.

36 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?

37 Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

38 For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

1 And He said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power."

What does it mean to follow Jesus?

Too many people want the blessings of Christianity without the burdens, success without sacrifice, the promises without the pain. But there is a cost of discipleship, and that's what Jesus emphasizes here.

A. Three Demands of Discipleship (34)

Jesus begins by presenting the demands of discipleship. Look at verse 34:

"When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, 'Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.'" (Mark 8:34)

Jesus gives this teaching to both the crowds and His disciples because He wants to make it crystal clear to everyone what it means to follow him. And so He gives three demands of discipleship here: 1) you must deny yourself, 2) you must take up your cross, and 3) you must keep following Jesus.

First,

1) Deny yourself.

The first demand of discipleship is that you deny yourself. To most of us, before we followed Christ, let's face it. We considered ourselves to be number one. For the most part, you made decisions in life according to how they would most benefit you. But now you have a new master. You are a disciple of Christ. Your first loyalty is to Him, not to yourself. Now I make decisions not on how it will benefit me, but on how it will bring the most glory to Christ.

Denying self is not the same thing as self-denial. Some people will practice self-denial by withholding certain things from themselves, like some people give up chocolate during Lent. That is not what Jesus is talking about.

Denying self is far more intense than that. Denying self implies that I stop listening to my own voice. I stop leaning on my own power. I stop trying to fulfill my own will and wishes.

The word "deny" means to "disavow any connection with something." It is the very word used to refer to Peter's denial of Jesus a little later on. As Peter was standing in the courtyard of the high priest, warming himself at a fire, someone accused him saying, "**You also were with Jesus of Nazareth.**" {Mark 14:67}. Peter denied that he had any connection with Jesus, finally cursing and swearing and saying, "**I do not know this Man of whom you speak!**" He denied his Lord. This is exactly the word Jesus uses when he tells us that, if we are going to come after him, we must first deny ourselves.

When I truly deny myself, I have no will but His will. I have no plans but His plans. I have no wants but what He wants for me. When I deny myself, I give up all my rights and I relinquish all control of my life to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus is calling those who claim Him as their Savior to make a total commitment to His Lordship in their lives. He wants absolute control in every area of our lives. He calls on us to disown ourselves and give Him the reigns of our lives. This phrase suggests a "once for all action". You can either affirm yourself and deny Jesus, or you can affirm Jesus and deny yourself. Jesus says the first demand of discipleship is that you deny yourself.

2) Take up your Cross.

The second demand of discipleship is that you take up your cross. When a man took up a cross in Jesus' day, that meant only one thing. That man was going to die. You see, the Romans made you carry your own cross to the place of execution. Jesus started out carrying His cross, but he was so exhausted from the beatings and floggings that they made someone else carry it the rest of the way for Him.

We sometimes talk about the minor pains and inconveniences of life as a "cross we have to bear." I don't like that phrase. It cheapens what Jesus is talking about here. Carrying the cross does not mean suffering the normal frustrations of life that all people suffer whether they are Christians or not. Carrying the cross means dying to self and living for God. It refers to the sacrifices you make because you are a Christian, including the willingness to suffer the greatest sacrifice of all – the willingness to give up your life rather than deny Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Jesus said, "Take up your cross."

By the way, this phrase also suggests a "once for all" action. I am to take up my cross and never lay it down until I reach the place of my death.

He is calling us to willingly bear the **shame**, the **reproach**, the **humiliation**, the **suffering**, the **hatred**, the **alienation** and even the **death** that may come to those who are associated with Him.

3) Keep Following Christ.

And then the third demand of discipleship is that you keep following Christ. The first two demands emphasize the actions you take right at the beginning of your walk with Christ. You deny yourself and take up your cross, ready to follow Jesus right to the end. But this third demand emphasizes the continuing nature of discipleship. Following Jesus means that you go the distance. You don't just start out on the path, but you continue to die daily unto self as you keep following Jesus for the rest of your life.

Jesus is calling His people to be constant followers. Some people follow on Sunday, but take a different path on Monday. Some people follow the Lord when they need help, but take another path when things get better. That is not what the Lord is looking for! Jesus is calling for His people to make a radical commitment to follow Him all the time, all the way to the end of their lives.

B. Three Reasons for Discipleship

You might say, "Wow! Those are some pretty strong demands of discipleship." And you're right, they are. Jesus knew that this was a hard saying, so he followed up the demands of discipleship with some reasons for discipleship, three reasons why you should accept the invitation to follow Christ.

1) Your Life depends on it. (35)

The first reason is that your life depends on it. Look at verse 35. Jesus says: "**For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.**" (Mark 8:35).

Verse 35 states a paradox. If you try to save your life by living for yourself and for your own goals or desires, you will end up losing it. But if you lose your life for Jesus, if you deny yourself and follow Christ, your life will be saved.

If you save your life, if you cling to it, hoard it, get all you can for yourself, then, without a doubt, Jesus says, you will lose it. This is not a mere platitude, a truism; He is stating a fundamental law of life. It is absolutely unbreakable. Nobody can break this law. If you save your life, says Jesus, you will lose it. You will find that you have everything you want, but you will not want anything you have. You will find that all of the life you tried to grasp has slipped through your fingers, and you have ended up with a handful of cobwebs and ashes, dissatisfied, hollow and empty, mocked by what you hoped to get.

Disciples will lose their lives for Jesus and the gospel. Why did Jesus come to earth? What was His mission? To suffer and die for sin, and to rise from the dead on the third day. That is the gospel. That is the message that we must share with our family and friends and neighbors and co-workers. That is the message that we must spread around the world through the work of evangelism and missions. Jesus said if you lose your life for Him and the gospel, you will save your life. Why should you accept Jesus' demands of discipleship? First of all, because your life depends on it.

2) Nothing is more valuable than your Soul (36-37)

The second reason is related to the first. What is more valuable than your life? Look at verses 36-37: "**For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?**"(Mark 8:36-37).

Jesus asks two rhetorical questions. In other words, they are left unanswered because the answers are so obvious. What good is it if you gain the whole world and yet forfeit your soul? The answer is, "No good at all!" You could gain everything, you could have more money, wealth and power than any other human being who has ever lived, and it means absolutely nothing if you lose your life or your soul in the process. What can you give in exchange for your soul? Nothing! Nothing is as valuable as your soul.

What is the worth of your soul? Before you answer, let me remind you that your soul is the only part of you that will live forever. Your body will die and be buried, but your soul will live on in either Heaven above or in Hell beneath. So, what is your soul worth?

Are you willing to trade your eternal soul for some alcohol or drugs? Are you willing to trade your soul for some sexual relationship? Are you willing to trade your soul for the right to do as you please and live life on your own terms? Are you willing to spend eternity in Hell for a few years of being your own god?

If you are lost, that is exactly what you are doing! You are trading the most valuable possession you have for the trinkets of this world. You have bought into the lie of the devil and you are going to lose all you have and all you are in a place called Hell.

Hear me speaking the truth to you in love: It's not too late to change the road you are on. Come to Jesus today and trade this world in for a permanent, eternal relationship with Him. Trade Hell for Heaven today!

3) Christ will return in power and glory. (8:38-9:1)

So why should you accept Jesus' demands of discipleship? 1) Your life depends on it; 2) Nothing more valuable than your soul; And 3) Christ will return in power and glory. Look at verse 38 and then the first verse of chapter nine:

"For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels. And He said to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power.'" (Mark 8:38-9:1)

Christ died, Christ rose again, and Christ will return in power and glory. When Christ returns, there will be a judgment. We each will have to give an account of our lives. Did we live for self, or did we live for God? If we were ashamed of Christ and His words, then Christ will be ashamed of us when He returns.

When Christ returns, the time of suffering for His followers will be over. All those who suffered for Christ will now follow him into victory. That is exactly what Peter wanted. He wanted the victory! He just wanted it without the suffering. But you can't go around the cross.

Jesus also said that some who were standing there **"will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power."** (Mark 9:1) We will talk more about that next week when we look at the account of the transfiguration in Mark 9. For now, though, just realize that Christ could return at any time. No one knows the hour of His return, and so we need to be ready at all times.

C. S. Lewis gathers all this up very well in these words from Mere Christianity:

God is going to invade this earth in force. But what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream, and something else -- something it never entered your head to conceive -- comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us, and so terrible to others, that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we have really chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back, to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it.

Perhaps the most famous author of the early part of the twentieth century was William Somerset Maugham, a novelist and a playwright, and a short story writer. His novel *Of Human Bondage* is a classic. His play, *The Constant Wife*, was performed for many, many years. He was a man who lived for his own tastes and comforts and sexual perversions. In 1965 he died at the age of 91, a fabulously rich man who lived in France. Although he hadn't written a word in years, he claimed he was still getting over 300 fan letters a week.

Several years later, a nephew of his, a man by the name of Robin Maugham, wrote in the Times newspaper, and he was recalling this relative of his, William Somerset Maugham:

“I looked round the drawing room at the immensely valuable furniture and pictures and objects that Willie [as he called him]...Willie's success had enabled him to acquire. I remembered that the villa itself and the wonderful garden I could see through the windows, a fabulous setting on the edge of the Mediterranean worth millions. Willie had eleven servants, including the cook, Annette, who was the envy of all the other millionaires on the Riviera. He dined on silver plates, was waited on by Marius, his butler, and Henri, his footman. But it no longer meant anything to him. The following afternoon I found Willie reclining on a sofa, peering through his spectacles at a Bible which had very large print. He looked horribly wizened, and his face was grim. “I've been reading the Bible you gave me, and I've come across the quotation, ‘What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?’ I must tell you, my dear Robin, that the text used to hang opposite my bed when I was a child. Of course, it's a lot of bunk, but the thought of it is quite interesting, all the same.”

And this nephew of his, Robin, goes on to describe an empty, bitter old man who repeatedly fell into shrieking terrors, and crying, “Go away! I'm not ready! I'm not dead yet, I tell you!” He was a man who had gained the whole world, and had lost his own soul.

CONCLUSION: In conclusion, let me end with two words of application.

1) Discipleship is for everyone. There are not two classes of Christians, those who just believe in Jesus and then those who follow him in discipleship. No, discipleship is for everyone. If you are not following Jesus, then you cannot call yourself a Christian.

2) Following Jesus is the best decision you will ever make; not following Jesus is the worst decision you will ever make. “If you don't bear the cross, then you can't wear the crown.” The demands of discipleship may be severe, but the rewards are great. There is nothing that compares with following Jesus. Following yourself is a dead end street to Hell.