

“Follow Me”

We sometimes assume following Christ simply means we must walk away from those sins which were once so much a part of our lives. But if we think about it, we should realize this is actually not a cost, but a gift. The Spirit of God provides us with wonderful freedom from the bondages of lust, of addictions, of pride and anger and complaining and fear.

Nevertheless, there is a cost to be paid. In Luke 9:57-62, we discover three very specific sacrifices we are called to make if we are truly to be followers of Christ, “fit for the kingdom of God.”

Relinquishing Refreshment

Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, “Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.”

And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”

God created us with basic physical needs, including the need for sleep, food and water, and a safe environment for our bodies. But the path Jesus walked was one of great self-sacrifice. He had no home, no bed of His own, no storehouse of food, no savings in the bank. If we would choose to follow Him, we too must be willing to lay aside our comforts and physical securities.

It's no coincidence that this was the first test Jesus faced in the wilderness. After forty days of fasting, He was hungry. Satan then challenged Him to “command a stone to become bread.” It was something Jesus could definitely do, and certainly His hunger was intense. The thought of eating something pleasant may have echoed from the very roots of His humanity. It was the same thought that had gone through the minds of Adam and Eve.

But Jesus knew life comes not from what we eat but “by every word of God.” God had not given Him permission to feed Himself. Instead, He waited without refreshment until the time when His Father's angels would bring Him food (Matthew 4:11).

Relinquishing Reputation

Then He said to another, “Follow Me.”

But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.”

Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.”

What was at stake was the man's reputation. Of course a good son would care for his own father. If he left that undone, his family and community would be horrified. How could Jesus expect him to endure such misunderstanding?

When Satan asked Jesus to worship him, the enticement was all the world's glory. Apparently it was Satan's to give, for Jesus did not question that. But He knew worship was due to God alone. He also

knew that in the proper time God would place His Son in His rightful position of honor. Rather than grasping for that honor prematurely, Jesus had already “made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant” (Philippians 4:7).

Relinquishing Relationships

And another also said, “Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.”

But Jesus said to him, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

All the third man wanted was to say goodbye to his family. How easy would it have been for Jesus to wait those few extra moments. Instead, in what seems a very harsh response, He described this “looking back” as something that would make the man unfit for the kingdom.

“If you are the Son of God,” Satan taunted, “let’s prove it! Your Father will certainly take care of you. He’s already promised you that.” Satan knew the Father loved His Son with an intensity that was beyond all comprehension. Surely the Father would not allow His Son to die. Surely He wouldn’t....

Understanding Our Cross

When Jesus challenged His would-be followers, He was only asking them to accept sacrifices He Himself had already chosen. Earlier (in Luke 9:23) Jesus described this price of obedience with stark clarity. “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”

We often miss what He is asking. A man might think his cross is his work, or perhaps his nagging wife. Those aren’t crosses—those are part of the curse. A woman might think her cross is having to live with a lazy husband, or perhaps some kind of physical pain. But these are also the result of the curses placed on Adam and Eve. Life is filled with hardships and suffering.

I believe we take up our daily cross when we deliberately choose to deny ourselves those good things which we could in fact have, things our culture would even tell us we have a *right* to have. Consider Jesus’ example in the wilderness, where He denied Himself the bread, the glory, and the demonstration of His Father’s loyalty. Those were all things He had a right to receive, but which He deliberately refused to take.

Understanding His Cross

In a very real sense, Christ’s first testing prepared Him for the far more difficult cross He was to face at the other end of His ministry. This time He wasn’t in a wilderness, but a garden—the garden of Gethsemane. According to Matthew, Jesus prayed the same prayer three times: “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.”

Why did it require three prayers? We cannot of course answer with certainty, but perhaps these agonizing decisions of relinquishment represented Jesus' willingness to once again lay down the three things He personally most longed to preserve.

The first thing He was being asked to endure was the merging of every kind of physical pain imaginable. This included fatigue, hunger, thirst, cold, the stabbing wounds of the thorns, the torn flesh from the scourging, the searing pain from the nails, and of course the slow, torturous death from suffocation or heart failure. Every source of refreshment was removed from His human body in those last unspeakable hours.

The second price He was being asked to pay was that of His reputation. He would be put on trial and accused mercilessly of crime and fraud. He would be mocked and spit upon. He would be nailed to the cross naked before the world. But even deeper than these humiliations, the pure Son of God would somehow have imputed into His being the vileness of all humanity's sin. In that hour, the holiness which was His very nature would be completely defiled.

But the third price He was facing may well have been the hardest. Jesus knew that in the final moments of His suffering there would come a point where His Father would turn away from Him. We can never comprehend this severing of the most powerful bond which ever existed, the actual separation of the Eternal Father from the Eternal Son. It was a pain so deep that it caused Jesus to cry out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

These three relinquishments were the cross of Christ. He endured them willingly because He had chosen to submit to His Father in all things. We must realize, however, that had Jesus not accepted the will of His Father, laying aside His own deep human desires, we would all in fact end up bearing the cross of Jesus. We would all one day suffer eternal physical torment in hell; we would all one day live in an existence of complete humiliation; and we would all be separated not only from our earthly loved ones, but from God Himself.

Taking Up Our Cross

As the result of His obedience, our crosses are now much lighter. Still there is a daily cross which each of us who would be His disciple must pick up and carry. We find it in those occasions where our human nature would demand its own wellbeing and where it must be deliberately, even forcefully, denied.

An easy-to-understand example is the matter of eating. God truly intended us to gratefully enjoy the food He provides. But unless we are able for a period of time to say no to the craving of our stomach, we won't be able to follow our Master when it might cost us a few meals.

While we must hold lightly to our legitimate sources of physical refreshment—and be willing to lay them aside as God requires—in other areas we may be called to deny our desires completely. In particular we should refrain from any mental or emotional refreshment which is not consistent with God's nature. There is a weariness of soul that would drive us to a vast array of secular distractions and amusements. The authentic follower of Jesus will turn instead quickly and only to Him (Matthew 11:29).

The “cross” of a relinquished reputation may be harder to discern. Most of us instinctively protect ourselves from the judgments of others. The excuses for our failures, the quick diverting of blame, the impulse to establish our value through name-dropping or other subtle boastings—how easily these become part of our conversations. From another angle, we may hesitate to speak of Jesus in those situations where it might invite rejection or scorn.

Are we truly willing to be despised for Him? Are we willing to accept ridicule or persecution, perhaps even from our own family and friends? These are not rare possibilities, but promised realities. “Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you...for the Son of Man’s sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy!” (Luke 6:22-23).

The final cross is always the hardest. We are able to bond deeply with those we love because God designed these ties to communicate the realities of His love for us. How then can Jesus make this disturbing statement, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26)? How can the One who commands us to love also tell us to hate?

The answer lies in the next verse: “And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” The cross is actually a crossroads. We can either turn right or left, or we can “come after” Jesus. On the right and left are what appear to be other viable choices offering safety and happiness. Ahead, we face death. We are asked to yield up our rights, our rest, our pleasures, our reputation, our relationships...in essence, our very identity.

If this were only a one-time event, our sense of the heroic might carry us across the line. But instead we reach this place daily, even hourly. The question always is this: “Will I choose something else over Christ?” You see, our gods are those things to which we give our money, our time, our energy, our thoughts, and our emotional attachments. Our theology may be impeccable, but if something delights us more than Jesus, then we have given ourselves to another god.

The solution, however, is beautifully simple. In His death and resurrection, Christ has fully provided everything we need. As we come to know Him, we discover Him to be our provider and protector, our great comforter, and the giver of refreshing rest. As we come to know Him, we discover our complete and unwavering value in His eyes. Finally, the sufficiency of His love enables us to release all human ties as the means of our emotional and spiritual support.

Then out of these hundreds of points of dying there arises new life, life that brings with it great freedom, joy, and the capacity to serve others through the overflow of grace we ourselves have received.

The call of Jesus is the same to each of us. “He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, *let him follow Me*; and where I am, there My servant will be also” (John 12:25-26).

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