

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?” 28 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” 30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. 31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. 32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

A Good Follower

“He was a good follower...,” may not be words you want to hear about your child or any loved one. Being a follower hasn’t quite had a good reputation since it was given the bad name of blind obedience during WWII. Even today, there aren’t many people who have high hopes of being a follower. Everyone wants to feel as if they are equal to everyone else. So, leaders disguise their power, corporations emphasize everyone is part of a “team” or a “family.” But there are still leaders and there are still followers. Not everyone should or can be a leader. But every now and then there is someone, a leader who inspires, gathers, and leads and people gladly follow.

If that’s the case the worst thing you could hear from such a leader is, “*Get behind me, Satan.*” Peter rushes out head, excited about the kingdom, only for Jesus to point them down a different path, a path they don’t want to go. They want to stick with Jesus and be his followers at the same time dictating to Jesus what direction to take, where they will follow. Jesus them and us, there is no room for that, take up your cross follow Jesus or find shame.

That doesn’t sit well. We like our independence. We don’t like ultimatums. We want to be equals. Jesus’ words call us to lives of obedience. It is difficult to be a follower. It’s tough because somewhere in our hearts there is a prima donna desire to be a leader. Jesus calls us to examine our behavior and make sure our lives are in line with the one we follow. The reality is we are far from obedient, unworthy and unwilling to take up the cross and follow Jesus, but instead of shame we are greeted with grace. We have a leader, worth following, who has taken up his cross for us.

That’s how Mark began his gospel. This one is worth following. “*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*” (1:1). This is good news as Jesus “immediately” goes to work. He’s

baptized and tempted by Satan. He heals the multitudes; preaches; heals lepers, and exposes false teachers. He calms storms; exorcises demons, multiplies bread, walks on the water, heals the lame, the deaf, the blind. He even raises Jairus' daughter from the dead. And all within the first eight chapters of Mark. Up to this point we've heard what people think of Jesus. We've heard the disciples question, "*Who is this that even the wind and wave obey him?*" We've heard suggestions, "*He's possessed by Beelzebul.*" And even, "*Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary?*"

Ironically, the only ones in the first half of Mark's gospel that get it are the demons. "*I know who you are, the Holy one of God.*" They aren't following Jesus and Jesus silences them. He then asks his followers, "*Who do you say I am?*" Peter takes the lead, steps up to the plate, and hits a homerun - "*You are the Christ.*" But if they are to serve as Jesus' representatives, they better understand who he is. Even with the right answer it's obvious they don't understand what that means so Jesus silences them, "*strictly charged them to tell no one about him.*" Jesus then instructs them what it means to be the Christ. He tells them plainly, not in parables, but simple language. "*the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.*

Peter pulls Jesus aside, "Did you really just say that? We've left everything for you. We've given up our jobs, family, and friends. You're all we have left." Peter is saying in the strongest possible terms that these things will not happen. Later Peter demonstrates his determination by taking his sword and swinging at the servant of the high priest. Peter is done with the struggle and now he has taken his stand against the Lord and against his anointed one. He wanted to lead Jesus off another direction, if bad things happen to him... bad things will happen to them. Peter and the disciples are willing to follow as long as they can lead.

Who is Jesus? Great moral giver? A guide? A great example for us to follow? Far too often I'm searching for a certain application that will make life better, remove a burden. We often refer to "our cross" as some burden we must carry, be it a strained relationship, or the aches and pains of life, "*That's my cross to carry.*" That is not what Jesus meant when he said, "*Take up your cross and follow me.*" Jesus carried his cross to Golgotha and no one was thinking of the cross as a symbolic burden to carry. The cross meant only one thing: the most painful and humiliating means that man could develop for death.

Luther wrote of the cross in the Large Catechism, "*We who would be Christians must surely count on having the devil with all his angels and the world as our enemies and must count on their inflicting every possible misfortune and grief upon us. For where God's Word is preached, accepted, and believed, and bears fruit, there the blessed holy cross will not be far away. Let no one think that he will have peace; he must sacrifice all he has on earth—possessions, honor, house and home, wife and children, body and life. Now, this grieves our flesh and the old Adam, for it means that we must remain steadfast, suffer patiently whatever befalls us, and let go whatever is taken from us*" (Large Catechism 3rd Part, 65).

But when Jesus becomes confrontational, pointing out where the cross leads, pain and suffering, the loss of goods, house, child, and wife. We may step into the lead position - pull Jesus aside, consult with the others, take a vote, "We don't want to go that way."

Jesus must say to us and our sinful nature, "*Get behind me, Satan. You do not have in mind the things of God but the things of men.*" "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and*

take up their cross and follow me. Peter's problem is alive and well. Often, we want Jesus to solve all our problems. We want him to make life comfortable for us. We think so little of our sin and what it deserves that we think we can make amends for it on our own. Sadly we may even assume that we can work together with Jesus as a team to achieve the same goal - assuming that the goal is my comfort. Willing to follow as long as we can lead.

Jesus said, "It must happen." It was necessary because all have sinned and no one is able live a life worthy of earning eternal life. *What can anyone give in exchange for their soul?* Nothing. Jesus knew that he had come to give his life as a ransom for all. Jesus knew where he was going. He knew that it would be a struggle. It would not be easy for him to take up our cross. But there is no other way. He must suffer many things because we have sinned against God. He must be rejected because we have rejected God. He must die because we have chosen a path that leads to death. He must be raised again because he has no sin and death has no hold on him.

Jesus leads the way. He doesn't drag his disciples behind. He doesn't throw stones at them to get them to move in the right direction or even command them out to the front lines while he hides in the back. He carries their cross, his cross, our cross out front and he dies upon it in their place. He is the Christ and that means he is the long promised Savior from sin.

Even for the sins of Peter. He forgives Peter and leads him to take up his cross and follow again and again. In the book of Acts we find Peter imprisoned, beaten, threatened all because of the cross. Jesus never apologizes for the cross. You may be mocked, lose a promotion because of your beliefs, friends may leave you for your association with Jesus, a gun may be held to your head as you confess Christ. That is the cross. That is the cross that so many have taken up and while you may die for this cross, you will not die on it. Jesus stepped in for you and me.

You can thank God for the interruptions in life, for the privileged and honor to be connected with Christ. Follow Jesus. Carry your cross, his cross - lovingly selected and placed on us. You have a leader who cares. And there is something great about being a follower that many people don't understand, You don't have to worry about anything. You don't have to take work home. You may have less power, but you also have less responsibility. Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light. You don't bear the sins of the world. You don't even carry your sins on your shoulder. You carry the cross of Christ. The burden of association with one who was crucified for you. That's someone you'd gladly stand up and identify with. That's someone you would gladly follow.

Even if that means, "*Deny yourself,*" which sounds more and more like repentance. We confess that we are poor, miserable sinners and that we deserve death and punishment. You denied that you were holy. You denied that you could save yourself. You said all this by faith, because you know that if you try to save your own life, you'll lose it. Daily, you deny yourself, confess your sin and rejoice that Jesus has made his cross to be yours. Daily, you rejoice that for His sake your life has been saved forever.

You may hear many things you don't want to hear. You may be threatened, mocked, ridicule. Jesus may rebuke us, "*Get behind me...*" but that's better than, "*Away from me, Satan.*" "*Get behind me*" is still an invitation to fall in line and follow the leader who carried his cross for us. Follow Jesus. He's already led the way. Amen.