

FOLLOWING JESUS



The first thing and the last thing that Jesus said to Peter was the same—"Follow me!" The first occasion was when Peter and his brother were casting a net into the Galilean Lake. Jesus passed by and called out, "Follow me, and I will teach you to fish for men" (Mk. 1: 16-18). Peter quickly responded and became a follower of Jesus.

Throughout the preaching tours of Jesus in Palestine, Peter continued to follow. In the fishing villages, on the mountains, in the desert, by the lake—he followed and he listened. Many months later, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, Peter

even declared that he would follow Jesus to prison and to death (Lk. 22:33), though as Luke makes clear, due to his fear Peter only followed at a distance (Lk. 22:54). On that same night, he eventually denied that he even knew Jesus (Lk. 22:55-62).

After Jesus had risen from the dead, he left Peter with the same command as at the beginning, "Follow me!" Peter had questioned the Lord about the future of another of the disciples, but Jesus simply said to him, "What is that to you? You must follow me!" (Jn. 21:19-22).

Finally, in later life, Peter wrote to a group of churches with this admonition: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps" (1 Pe. 2:21).

So, then, what does it mean to follow Jesus? Obviously, it cannot mean for us exactly the same thing that it meant to the rural people of Galilee who had Jesus physically in their midst. The call to follow Jesus must mean more than traveling around the countryside while listening to Jesus preach, for as Peter wrote to the churches in Asia Minor, Christ left us an example that we should follow in his steps, and it is apparent that he was talking about a way of life rather than a geographical route.

Perhaps we should start with the word "disciple". The followers of Jesus were called his disciples, and the term refers to someone who is a learner or a student. One who follows Jesus is always learning more about him, learning not only in the sense of intellectual awareness, but even more importantly, in the sense of learning to live according to the pattern which Jesus taught. This is why John wrote, "Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus walked" (1 Jn. 2:6).

In the gospels, Jesus made the call to discipleship central in his teachings. He knew that at the very core of human nature was selfishness, pride, and the desire for power. So, he taught that to follow him, one must say "no" to him or herself (Lk. 9:23-24). Those who wished to follow Jesus but still retain other loyalties could not do so (Lk. 9:57-62). In fact, even family loyalties must be sacrificed, if necessary, in order to follow Jesus (Lk. 14:25-27). The cost of discipleship is the willingness to give up everything for Jesus (Lk. 14:28-33). It is the acceptance of Jesus' radical claims about himself, and the submission of our lives to him as the Lord of life.

The call to follow Jesus is an intense daily challenge. This is why Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must ... take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk. 9:23). In every circumstance in life, to follow Jesus means that you ask yourself, "What would Jesus do?" When making decisions, when confronting clients, when socializing with friends, when addressing those in need—all these circumstances are to be controlled by the answer to the question, "What would Jesus do?" Sometimes, perhaps often, the answer will be acutely uncomfortable, because it will deeply conflict with our own wishes.

To a wealthy young man who claimed to have kept the ten commandments from his youth, Jesus said, "Go, sell everything you own and give it away. Then come and follow me" (Mk. 10:21). Sadly, the young man turned away. His love of wealth prevented him from following Jesus. The refusal to follow Jesus can

be for many reasons. For the crowds in Galilee, it was the scandal of Jesus' claims about himself (Jn. 6:53-66). For the Jewish leaders, it was a deep loyalty to their traditional religion (Jn. 9:13, 16, 24-29). For Judas, it was disillusionment (Mt. 26:14-16, 20-25). For yet others, it was a field or a purchase or a marriage (Lk. 14:16-24). When Jesus calls us to follow him, he always seems to ask us to give up that thing which is most likely to draw us away from him. As one person has said, "The things that I do not understand about the sayings of Jesus are not what disturb me. What disturb me are the things that I understand all too well!"

One might well ask with Peter, "Lord, we have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" (Mt. 19:27). But Jesus replied, "No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come, eternal life" (Lk. 18:29-30).

Something should also be said about the importance of knowing the stories of Jesus. The accounts of the teachings and actions of Jesus were the primary preaching material for the earliest Christians. While they did not have the advantage of a printed Bible, as we do today, the public reading of the gospels and the retelling of the stories of Jesus were eagerly received. Today, Christians can become familiar with the life of Jesus both by hearing and by reading, and it cannot be overemphasized that they must learn more about Jesus. To daily ask oneself the question, "What would Jesus do," requires intimacy with his life and words. To ask the question without any familiarity concerning his life and words is to lapse into an ambivalent subjectivism.

It would be impossible here to enumerate all of the teachings of Jesus. Nevertheless, the essence of the life to which Jesus called us can be sketched in. Jesus himself said that upon two commandments hung the entire law and prophets of the Old Testament: to love God with all one's heart, soul, strength and mind—and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lk. 10:25-27). Who is one's neighbor? It is anyone with a need (Lk. 10:29-37). Jesus was concerned about things such as forgiving people of their offenses (Mt. 6:14-15; 18:21-35) and loving those who did not love in return (Mt. 5:43-48). The sum of the life of Jesus has been aptly encapsulated by one person who said that Jesus simply "found wounds and healed them." He was the "man for others." He called his followers to servanthood (Jn. 13:1-17), not to power (Mt. 20:20-28). One of his final sayings on the cross was a prayer for the forgiveness of his executioners, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:34).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Christian martyr in World War II, wrote, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." The call to discipleship is a gracious call, but it is also a costly call. As Bonhoeffer said, "It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life." So to you and me, just as to Peter and Andrew and James and John, Jesus says, "Follow me! Follow me and I will make you..."



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