



## **Follow after Him: Walking in the Footsteps of Christ**

“You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29),<sup>1</sup> Peter proclaims boldly in the villages surrounding Caesarea Philippi. So certain a declaration coupled with so little understanding. Who is this Christ that Peter follows? Does Peter grasp the implications of his statement? More pressing still, do we? Do we grasp all that it means to follow this Christ?

“And he began to teach them” (v 31). Jesus begins to expound all that his messianic office entails. To be the Christ—the Anointed One, the Savior of the World—the Son of Man must suffer ignominiously at the hands of the religious establishment before being killed at the hands of a sinful world. But he will rise again. His frankness in disclosing this makes it all the more uncomfortable. Peter cannot bear it. He will not hear it. He takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. We might well wonder at the audacity of rebuking God—as if Peter knew better than he! And yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we will own that often we think this. We may not rebuke God, but we do casually dismiss him when his perspective differs from our own. Should the Son of Man suffer and die? Certainly not. He should come as a conquering king instead. Should we forgive even at great cost to ourselves? We couldn’t possibly! You don’t know what I’ve suffered. Should we give up complaining absolutely, seeing in it a sinful lack of faith and gratitude? Nonsense. You don’t know how hard it is.

Jesus will have none of it. He turns back to the whole group, refusing to be taken aside and having his opinions cast aside. He rebukes Peter. Three times the evangelist Mark uses the word rebuke in the span of just four verses. “Jesus *rebuked* them, so that they would not tell anyone about him” (v 30). Peter rebuked Jesus (v 32). Jesus rebuked Peter (v 33). This is worldview collision. Two ideologies so incompatible that they simply cannot peacefully coexist. When our opinions collide with God’s, we must

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are the author’s.



allow every thought to be taken captive to the obedience of Christ. Peter does not have in mind the things of God, but of men. This explains the sharp rebuke. This explains the need for secrecy (v 30), as the disciples simply did not comprehend the mission of Jesus, and could well have jeopardized it had they insisted on his becoming a military conqueror rather than the Suffering Servant.

Jesus cannot allow this to happen: “Get behind me, Satan!” Strong words for a hot-headed man. Peter’s words, though basically human, are so misguided that Jesus wonders if perhaps they have come from another source, as Satan tempts him not to go to the cross, to fulfill the mission of his Father. Interestingly, the word “behind” normally has a positive connotation. In fact, in the next verse, Jesus will invite all his followers to “get behind” him, that is, to follow after him. Here, however, it is not an invitation to follow but a summary dismissal. Peter should have been following behind Jesus, but instead he has been sent behind him. This is the trouble with discipleship sometimes: we forget who is supposed to be in front!

Then Jesus summarizes the whole of the Christian walk—the whole purpose for which Follow After Ministries exists—in a sweeping, profound declaration. He calls the crowd to himself, as this is teaching not meant just for the Twelve but for all generations and peoples who would claim him as Lord. And he says, “If anyone wishes to follow after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (v 34). This is meant for “anyone” who wishes to follow Jesus—not for the spiritual elite, not for ascetics and missionaries and giants of the faith who carry the gospel to the farthest reaches of the earth before suffering glorious martyrdom and passing through those gates of splendor, no—but for you and me.

Who wants to follow after Jesus? Who wants to get behind him, where Peter should have been all along? Here’s how you do it. First, *deny yourself*. We all know what this word “deny” means. It is the same word used when Peter disowns Christ the night before his crucifixion. It means to

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sever a relationship so completely as to have absolutely nothing to do with the person anymore. And this is what we are to do with the self! As one commentator puts it, “It is not the denial of something to the self, but the denial of the self itself.”<sup>2</sup> To deny oneself, then, means to refuse absolutely to be guided by your own interests and desires. We often trivialize this commandment by our weak attempts at denial—giving up chocolate for Lent or something equally asinine, as if that were what Christ had in mind! But we are to follow in Christ’s footsteps here, and Christ denied himself absolutely. He,

being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself and became obedient to death  
—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8, NIV)

This is radical self-denial; chocolate plays no part.

Second, *take up your cross*. Oh, how we have domesticated this phrase today, where a difficult co-worker or nagging illness becomes “our little cross to bear.” But this does not have to do with discomfort—this gets at our willingness to die. Few of us today, especially in the Western world, have this mentality. We are generally unwilling to die or even suffer minor persecution for the sake of Christ and his kingdom. We must remember: God does not call us to be comfortable. In fact, he fairly well promises us just the opposite if we really follow him! This makes sense, as we are following Christ who didn’t exactly lead a comfortable life. Now this command connects back to the denial of self. Roman executioners forced the condemned to carry their crosses to break the will of the prisoner. Imagine today if governments asked those on death row to connect the wires on their own electric chair or mix

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<sup>2</sup> Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the New Testament Press, 1981): 37.

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the chemicals for their lethal injection. That would break your will! Taking up the cross, then, is a brilliant metaphor of dying to self. And this is the attitude we are to have.

Oddly enough, then, Jesus repeats himself. If you want to follow after Jesus, what must you do next? Follow after him. Airtight reasoning, I suppose. This is the summation of the other two commands. This is radical reorientation away from self and towards God and others—absolute obedience to God regardless of consequences, that he might receive all glory from our lives of devotion to him. This means going where God calls without complaining, because it cannot be worse than becoming sin for the redemption of humanity. This means leaving friends and family, just as Christ left his Father in heaven. This means doing what is unpopular, time-consuming and difficult day in and day out—glorying in the mundane—as we seek to fulfill the commission Christ left for us. If we want to follow after Jesus, we must follow him. Go on. Get behind him. Follow after him.